Gilded Wings

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by Arachnid_Of_The_Woods

Summary

Life was such a fleeting thing- Asher often brought himself back to this thought throughout the course of his life. He was frequently reminded just how fragile things could be, how close death loomed over him no matter how fast he ran.
But that didn't matter now, with his broken wings and fading memories. What mattered right now, was waking up on February 19th. It was his birthday, he was turning five years old and his mom had promised him something very special.

Notes

Hello! So, this is my first time ever posting my stories anywhere, but I have been working on this one for a long time now. That being said, some parts of it are very old and I cringe too hard trying to reread it, so my writing style may change as the story progresses. PLEASE be kind in the comments, but also please tell me what other tags you suggest adding. I really truly hope people will read and interact with this so I can be motivated to finish it. Also, all the things tagged happen LATER in the story, but I do have a very large portion of it written so things should be accurate.

Everything starts somewhere

Life was such a fleeting thing- Asher often brought himself back to this thought throughout the course of his life. He was frequently reminded just how fragile things could be, how close death loomed over him no matter how fast he ran.

But that didn't matter now, with his broken wings and fading memories. What mattered right now, was waking up on February 19th. It was his birthday, he was turning five years old and his mom had promised him something very special. He stumbled out of his bedroom on the second story of their little suburban home, down the hall, and down the stairs into the first floor. The house smelled like pancakes and cleaning chemicals, and upon looking around he saw that all the things on the floor had been cleaned up.

To him at that time, it was normal, but looking back on the memory, their house was in complete disarray quite often. There were beer bottles and old dishes with food rotting on them strewn about their house- with an alcoholic father what else was to be expected, anyways.

He headed into the kitchen, clutching his little stuffed teddy bear- it was new at the time, his mother had gotten it on sale just a few months ago- and he brought it everywhere with him.

It was light brown in color, it had a cute little red bowtie and beady black eyes, and it was still so soft even after a few months of wear and tear.

Stepping into the kitchen, his small bare feet instantly felt cold from the old off-white tiles, the grout in them had long begun to chip and yellow- the whole kitchen looked trashy from an outside perspective, but to Asher this was home.

"Good morning, sweetheart-" His mother said as she spotted him, smiling softly down at him. Her voice was raspy and it always sounded like she needed to cough from her years of being an avid smoker- not just of cigarettes, but that was the main thing she smoked.

She could have been pretty, she could have been a model- she was skinny with long black hair draped in once-elegant waves over her shoulder, emerald green eyes, and a kind smile. Now she was wrinkled with age, graying with stress, and struggling to maintain a home with no help from the man she married for "love". She would always be pretty in Asher's eyes, though. She was his mother, of course he would see her through the pinkest of rose tinted glasses.

She bore a pair of gorgeous black raven wings upon her back, though even they were now blooming with gray feathers.

She seemed much too young to be aging so fast- only in her thirties at the time.
“Good morning mama-” He chirped. Asher had no such features- yet. Most children gained their unique features at the age of eight to twelve, but it wasn’t too odd to be seen earlier or later in life. There was no real scientific way to explain what was happening, really- but all these kids a few decades ago were suddenly gaining these animalistic features, which usually seemed to match their personality traits to some extent. So for example, his mother was more adaptable and intelligent than other kids her age, even before she gained her wings.
It wasn’t usually so easy to predict, but typically if two people with bird features had a kid, they would produce a bird offspring. Though, even this wasn’t set in stone, but typically if the child was not as expected, the child's paternity was usually questioned.
Even more strangely, most people with these animal features gained a friend of that species later in life. That could be a little easier to predict, however- the creature usually showed up at a time the person needed them the most during their youth. Usually around sixteen to twenty-two they would show up, and how long the animal stayed with the person could vary.
Some were lifelong bonds, some were just a few months, and some lasted years before they broke off.
But he was jumping too far ahead- he didn’t know any of that back in this memory, but it was too hard not to look back on these memories and realize things he’d never known before.
All he knew now was that his mom was smart, she didn’t have a pet raven anymore, and in a few years he would figure out what he was going to be.
“Are you ready for breakfast?” She asked as she turned back to the stove.
“Yes, I’m starving!” He replied excitedly.
“Wonderful, go sit at the table, alright my dear?” She said with a hum.
“Okay, mama!” He answered and headed to the table in the dining room. It was connected to the kitchen, so he could still see her as she practically danced around the kitchen. She took great joy in cooking, Asher noticed- he hoped that some day he could help her cook, and they could bond over it.
A few moments later, she headed over to him with two plates. They both had a nice stack of pancakes on top of them, as well as a ton of syrup and even whipped cream.
Asher grinned as she placed a plate in front of him. He could barely remember his previous birthdays, but he knew today was special compared to them.

“Alright, now hang on while I take a picture!” She smiled and grabbed her phone, taking a few pictures in a very quick span of time before she settled in her seat next to Asher.
“Now eat up, then I’ve got some big big news!” She said happily.
“Okay!” Asher replied, even more excited now. They both ate their pancakes, this was one of the best memories Asher had with his mom- even now as a child he could appreciate her kindness and beauty. After breakfast, she cleaned up and brought him into the living room, where they both settled on the couch.
“Alright, Asher- today is a very important day. Me and your father have decided you deserve a brother-” She started, looking at Asher expectantly. At this point in time, he didn’t understand how children were made- he was just excited at the prospect of having a sibling, a lifelong friend. He’d always been an only child, but he wished so badly for a sibling, since he didn’t go to school yet and there were no kids his age in the neighborhood. He often found himself quite lonely when both of his parents were away, which was pretty often during the day.
“Really??” He asked excitedly.
“Mhm! So your father is going to come home early, and we are going to have a little boy come here!” She said happily.
“Oh wow! Today??” He grinned.
“Yes! In just a little bit, actually- so quick, let’s go tidy up your room! A lady is going to have to come look around and make sure our home is good for the boy-” She chirped and jumped up, heading up the stairs. Asher followed her quickly, stumbling over his own feet in his attempt to keep up.
“Okay!”
They spent the next little bit cleaning his room, which just had dirty clothes and toys in it really. He didn’t have all that many belongings, however- so what it really needed was some vacuuming and organizing, which didn’t take long.
Before they knew it, there was a ring at the door- Asher practically flew down the stairs after his mother as she went to open the door. Outside stood a stern looking older lady, and from his angle he couldn’t see if anyone was with her or not.
“Hello, Mrs. Lawrence. I am Ezra, I’m Lance’s case worker. May we come in?” The woman spoke in a commanding tone.
“Yes, of course! Welcome Ezra, and welcome Lance! This is my son, Asher- my husband should be home any minute-” Asher’s mother said with a smile as she opened the door. The boy who walked in was a good bit older than Asher, but the kid was excited nonetheless.
Ezra led in Lance, who had pale skin and dark brown hair. He had these soft brown eyes that made Asher feel safer somehow. He looked

at least eleven, but he was quite tall for his age. His hair was unkempt and curly, and the clothes he wore were so small that they barely fit his body. He had a beat up backpack that likely had all of his things in it. He looked around before locking eyes on Asher, and squinting at him in an almost suspicious way.
His mother led Ezra and Lance to the couch, where they all sat down.
“Asher, go color at the table alright?” His mother said softly, and he nodded before running off to the dining room.
He heard them all speaking to each other, but it was too quiet for him to really hear what was said. He grabbed some of his coloring supplies from a kitchen drawer and plopped them down on the table, humming a little as he drew whatever came to mind- which right now was a tree in his backyard.
He started to get a little carried away, and he began drawing himself and Lance out in the yard as well. Of course he was just using crayons, so it was no masterpiece, but it made him happy.
His new brother- they could play together, eat together, they could be best friends.
He was so deep in thought that he jumped a little when he heard Ezra speaking, now suddenly right next to him.
“Is it alright if I ask you a few questions, Asher?” She asked as she sat in a chair next to him. Asher always got a little nervous when people he didn’t know spoke to him- his hands always shook and he got this odd feeling like there was a pit in his stomach.
He just nodded a little and set down his coloring supplies, looking up at Ezra.
“Are you happy a lot?” She asked, and Asher thought for a moment before nodding. He could get lonely, and he was scared sometimes, but right now he was happy.
“Good- do you feel like your mom does a good job taking care of you?” She said softly, and Asher nodded even more aggressively now. He loved his mom, and he knew she loved him too.
“Alright, and are you excited to see Lance move into this house?” She asked him, and he once again nodded. He sort of zoned out as she asked a few more similar questions to those ones, then she seemed satisfied and left the room.
It wasn’t long after that until he heard his dad come home- but he wasn’t stumbling like he usually did, and his mom didn’t start shouting at him. Today must be one of their good days- his mom had once told him they have some good days, and some bad days, and that was okay as long as they loved each other.
His dad was just about the exact opposite of his mom- short, dirty blonde hair in a military cut, and cold blue eyes. He had some muscle, but it was all hidden now in extra flesh and skin from years of

drinking and lazing around. But he was tall and scary, and despite having immense respect for just about anyone older than him, Asher avoided his father like the plague.
Ezra spoke to his father, and then started a search around the house. His parents followed her around as she did that, so Lance headed into the kitchen where Asher was still sitting quietly. He looked over at Lance, who just stared at him silently for a long while, standing still in the doorway.
“You’re Asher?” Lance eventually asked, and Asher nodded a bit.
“Mkay. I don’t like little kids, so leave me alone while I’m here.” Lance mumbled, crossing his arms as he sat across from Asher at the table. Asher looked at him with confusion and a bit of disappointment.
“Why?” The little boy asked quietly.
“Because they’re annoying. There were too many kids in my last home, I don’t want to put up with that shit again.” Lance grumbled.
Asher froze up and looked down at the table. Lance sounded upset, and Asher knew that bad things tended to follow when upset people swore.
They both sat there in silence until Ezra and Asher’s parents came back into the room.
“Well, everything seems in order then. I’ll be back in a few weeks to check in. Lance, just call me if you need anything.” Ezra said as she headed to the door. Lance just nodded and slumped back in his chair.
“Alright, thank you so much Ezra! We’ll see you next time,” Asher’s mom said as she led Ezra outside.
“Asher, why don’t you head up to your room for a bit.” Asher’s dad said. Asher nodded a bit and grabbed all of his art supplies as quickly as he could, running to put them away. He didn’t realize but in his haste he’d dropped a marker on the ground.
“Asher.” His dad said, his tone instantly made him stiffen up and freeze at the bottom of the stairs.
He looked back to his dad, who just pointed at the marker on the ground. He ran back over and picked it up- he could tell that Lance was watching him, but he didn’t dare look over at the other boy.
“Sorry, papa-” He said quietly as he went to put the marker away. He was a little surprised to hear his father sigh, then speak in a bit of a softer tone.
“It’s alright, bud- just remember to clean everything up next time, okay?” He said with a little smile. Asher just nodded a bit and then quickly headed up the stairs.
He went to his room and sat by himself for a while, quietly playing with his stuffed bear and elephant toys.
The next couple of days went by quickly, but everything felt strange. Neither of his parents drank any of the smelly liquid they usually had,

and they were being really nice to Lance. They got him a bunch of new clothes and took both of the boys to the mall- but Asher knew better than to ask for anything from any of the shops they went to. Lance generally ignored Asher; everyone did, but that was okay. Children were meant to be seen and not heard, or at least that's what his aunt used to say. They didn't see her much anymore, Asher wondered why from time to time but he dare not ask about it.
One day went a little bit differently, however. For that time neither of his parents had been going anywhere alone throughout the day like to work or anything, but today his dad was gone before breakfast. During the meal, Lance asked where he was, and his mom replied that he had gone to work since he ran out of vacation days, whatever that meant.
"Mkay." Lance replied, eating his cereal.
"Oh, and I was thinking today you and I could go alone to the mall? A new store opened up that I thought you might like-" Asher's mom said with a smile.
"Alone?" Lance asked, slightly confused.
"Mhm, without Asher. He looks like he's wanting some alone time anyways-" She replied, and Asher agreed, he did want to be alone. His mom was so smart, she knew him so well.
"Where would Asher go? I didn't see a daycare at the mall." Lance mumbled, and Asher's mom looked a little confused.
"Well, he'd be staying here?" She responded.
"Isn't he a little young?" Lance inquired.
"Oh no. He's a very smart boy, he can be left alone for a few hours-" She reassured, and Asher couldn't help but smile. He was smart- and if his mom was saying it, then it must be true.
"... Okay- then sure." Lance replied. After breakfast, Asher headed to his room- still beaming from the indirect compliment.
He heard Lance and his mom leave the house as he settled in, finally things were settling back to normal.
He didn't hear anyone come home for hours- it was just about dark outside when he heard the front door open and slam shut, and he heard the familiar sound of his father stumbling inside.
He was pretty hungry by now, but he couldn't risk leaving and bothering his dad, so he just shut off the lights in his room and went into the closet. It was a walk in closet, and there was a light in there he could turn on, so it became a nice place to play and be out of everyone's way.
It wasn't that much later that he heard Lance and his mom come home as well. Lance was quickly sent upstairs though, and even though Asher couldn't hear it he was sure his parents were arguing with each other.

He jumped a little as he heard a knock on his door, and when he didn't respond the door was pushed open.
He heard footsteps walk into the room, then look around before heading to the closet.
"... Asher?" Lance asked quietly.
Asher stood up and opened the closet door a bit so he could peek out. Lance was standing right next to the door looking a little confused- he was holding a little plastic bag that seemed to have something small in it.
"What are you doing?" Lance asked.
"... Staying out of the way-" Asher mumbled, opening the door a little wider so Lance could come in. He essentially had a pillow fort on the ground in his closet, but a very simple one so it was easy to clean up. He had a few toys there and some half finished coloring papers. Lance stepped inside and looked around, stiffening a little when Asher shut the door.
"Okay- why?" He asked.
"What?" Asher asked back.
"Why are you hiding out in here?" Lance reworded.
"So I don't make a mess- mama and papa have enough to worry about when they have bad days-" Asher replied, his response sounding very rehearsed.
"... Right, sure. Well look- I got- your mom got you something-" Lance mumbled and offered Asher the bag. The young boy lit up as he took it and grabbed whatever was inside, pulling it out to reveal a pastel blue sweater. It was a little too big for him, but he barely noticed as he quickly put it on.
"Oh! I have to go say thanks-" Asher said with a smile, pausing to listen for the arguing downstairs. He could barely hear anything- it would only get worse as it got darker, now would be the best time. He left the closet and headed for the door.
"Wait wait, kid hang on a sec-" Lance tried to stop him, but it was too late- Asher was already heading down the stairs.
He went into the kitchen where his dad was very quickly drinking a bottle of that nasty stuff he liked to drink, and his mom was talking quietly to him. She froze as she saw Asher enter the room- he stood by the stairs and smiled at her.
"Thank you for the gift, mama-" He said quietly. He jumped as his dad slammed down the bottle onto the counter.
"The f'ck 're you doin' down here lil sh't-" His dad slurred and stumbled towards him. Asher took a step back, looking up at the man with wide eyes.
"Frank, don't! Leave him alone-" His mother pleaded, but the man ignored her as he swung his fist down and hit Asher hard enough that

he fell back into the stairs.
Terrified, Asher turned and quickly scampered up them as his mom began shouting. Stupid. He was supposed to know better. He should have waited to thank his mom, he shouldn't have come downstairs. In his haste, he forgot Lance was still in his room as he shut the door and went to curl up in the corner of his closet. Tears slipped down his cheeks, one of which was red and would surely bruise soon.
Lance stood awkwardly outside the closet before hesitantly stepping inside, shutting it and sitting on the floor. He wasn't looking directly at Asher, but his body was facing in his direction. Asher just watched him with tearfilled eyes, struggling to catch his breath and keep himself from full on sobbing.
"It's- it's okay, kid- you didn't do anything wrong-" Lance mumbled, looking at the ground. Asher didn't reply, he just hugged his knees to his chest and curled up in a little ball. The next thing he knew, Lance was gently pulling him into a hug. He basically melted against Lance and buried his face in his shoulder, tears still streaming down his cheeks.
"'S okay… calm down, kid…" Lance mumbled softly.

My dear

Chapter Summary

> Asher experiences abuse, Lance puts a stop to it like a good big brother, and the poor traumatized children try to cope

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Things were different after that- Lance and Asher quickly grew closer. Lance had to go to school shortly after, so Asher was back to being left home alone from morning to midafternoon, but now Lance would come home and they could spend time together.
Lance was still pretty quiet, but he usually just did his own thing and allowed Asher to be near him while he did so. In Asher's head, they were best friends- in Lance's head, he was starting to like the kid a little bit. Asher learned years later that Lance didn't actually have a problem with younger kids, he just didn't want to get attached to them because he used to have biological siblings who were all separated from him when they were young, and he was scared of feeling that hurt again.
But still, Asher began to grow on Lance. Now it was just a few days after Lance's twelfth birthday- he'd been with the family for a little over a year now, and Asher was now a bit over six years old. Lance was sitting with Asher on the floor of his bedroom- Lance usually preferred to hang out in his own room now. He'd had to listen to a lot of their parents' arguments, and had to put up with a lot of their neglect, but ultimately he received more gifts from them and was generally treated better, so his room had cooler things in it like a TV and a console to play games on.
He also had his own phone- he'd had once since the day he moved in, but he got a new one for his birthday. He usually let Asher use it, however, since he rarely needed it when he was at home and preferred to use his laptop anyways.
Right now, Lance was playing Minecraft on his TV, and Asher was just watching quietly, occasionally asking a few questions about the game. They were having a pretty good time together, when all of the sudden Lance stiffened up and spasmed, collapsing to the floor.
"Lance??" Asher asked with worry and a touch of downright fear as he jumped up and went over to Lance, who was trembling and curled up in a ball, his face scrunched up with pain.
"Get- get your mom-" Lance hissed, his teeth gritted.

“What’s going on??” Asher started to panic.
“Go get her!” Lance shouted, causing Asher to jump up in a state of shock and run to the door. Lance had never yelled at him before- tears sprung to his eyes as he opened the door.
“Mama! Something’s wrong with Lance-!” He shouted, his voice trembling.
“What?? What happened-??” She shouted back from downstairs. She quickly ran up and shoved past Asher to get to Lance, who was sobbing now as he clutched his head. Asher watched in horror as his mom knelt down and began comforting Lance, before turning to Asher.
“Asher, go to your room and be quiet.” She demanded, her voice firm but a little shaky.
“But-” Asher began, not wanting to leave Lance’s side.
“Go!” She shouted over him, and he bolted into the room. He shut the door and curled up in his closet, trembling as he listened to Lance’s sounds of pain and his mom trying to comfort him.
He could only wonder why she wasn’t taking him to a hospital. His little mind raced as he began to panic that Lance was going to die or something really bad was going to happen to him- he was shaking like a leaf and his vision blurred. His breathing quickened and it felt like his heart was pounding out of his chest.
He was trying to calm himself down, he felt like he was going to pass out- it had happened before when he got himself too worked up like this. It felt like a sudden switch was flipped in his mind- suddenly his breathing slowed and he began to relax.
He looked down at his hands, which he now realized had been clawing at his arms. He rotated them around, flexing his fingers as he watched- they were his hands, but they didn’t feel like his hands. Everything was a little muffled, or toned down- like he was watching a movie inside his own brain.
It wasn’t a bad feeling- he wasn’t that worried anymore, and now that he was listening to something other than his heartbeat he could hear that Lance was no longer in pain- he was just quietly talking with their mom now.
He sighed with relief and stood up, stepping out of the closet and looking around. Everything felt just not quite real- it was strange, but he didn’t mind it.
He sat on the edge of his bed and looked at everything with a whole new perspective, his mind felt more empty than it had for as long as he could remember. Eventually Lance came and knocked on his door- he had to remind himself that he needed to answer.
“Come in-” He said softly. His voice even sounded different- like it wasn’t his own, or like he was really hearing it the way that someone

else would.
Lance pushed open the door and stumbled inside- he looked pale and weak, and what really caught Asher off guard was a new, large pair of wings on his back. They were white and fluffy right now, like a hatchling's wings.
“Hey kid…” Lance mumbled, stumbling to sit next to Asher.
“Are you okay..?” Asher asked, the worry creeping back into his voice and mind.
“‘M fine- I guess- I was sort of expecting this to happen soon. She said we won’t know what kind of bird I am for a while, though- until the new feathers grow in. I’m not hurting anymore, though- it hurt while the wings were… sprouting. But now I’m just tired- I hope I didn’t scare you too much-” Lance explained softly.
“Oh… I’m okay though- I’m sorry I didn’t listen right away…” Asher mumbled. He started to shake as all the worry and sorrow came back- he almost missed the way it felt when he felt numb.
“Hey, it’s alright… I’m not- mad at you- I was just scared and in pain-” Lance said quietly. He shifted to hug Asher, who started to feel himself relax again as he hugged Lance back.
“I wonder if you’re gonna be a raven like mama…” Asher whispered.
“I don’t know, maybe…” Lance whispered back.
Lance spent that night in Asher’s room with him, which started to become a somewhat frequent occurrence. Asher didn’t realize it just then, but Lance was starting to become more scared. In Asher’s child brain, Lance was probably the bravest and coolest person he knew- but in reality, Lance was only a child as well. A child who was growing up in an abusive home and with no set future, and somehow both the kids managed to comfort each other.
Their mom was clearly very happy about Lance, though. Asher got to spend a lot less time with him as she took him everywhere to show off his wings, to show him how to care for them and such.
Asher would be lying if he said he didn’t feel a little jealous- of both of them, honestly. Jealous of his mom for getting to spend so much time with Lance, and jealous of Lance for getting so much attention from their mom, all while he just stayed in his room for hours a day.
He at least got to spend time with Lance in the evenings though- he was worried about when school started again, however- since then they would have even less time together.
One morning, Asher woke up from the light coming in through his window. Lance had stayed the night in his room, so they were snuggled next to each other. He opened his eyes and saw a bunch of little white fluffy feathers scattered around them- and when he looked at Lance’s wings there seemed to be new buds of feathers growing in.
“Lance-” He said with a gasp. Lance woke up a second later after

Asher lightly shook his shoulder.
“Huh…?” Lance mumbled and looked around.
At first he was a little groggy, but upon seeing the feathers he snapped fully awake and his eyes widened as he looked at his wings, carefully touching one of the soon to be feathers.
“Woah-...” He said quietly.
“Does it hurt?” Asher asked with concern.
“No- they’re a little itchy though- but your mom said I’m not supposed to scratch them-” Lance replied.
“Oh- why not?” Asher looked up at him, tilting his head a bit.
“Because it damages them, or something- I just hope that the feathers grow in before I have to go back to school-” Lance mumbled.
“Mhm- I wonder what they’re gonna look like-” Asher said quietly, looking closer at Lance’s wings with fascination.
“Me too-” Lance responded. A moment later, they heard their mom shout from downstairs.
“Asher! Lance! Come down here-”
They both got up and left the room, heading down the hall and then down the stairs. Once they both stood at the bottom of the stairs, their mother approached them. She looked like she was going to say something, but paused for a moment when she saw Lance’s wings.
“Oh my goodness, it happened! Oh, it’ll just be a matter of days now before they feather!” She cheered and looked over Lance.
“Ah- yeah- do you think they’ll be grown in before school?” Lance asked.
“They should be, but in case they aren’t you don’t have to go for the first few days if you don’t want to- this is a sensitive time for young birds, after all!” She replied, her voice was incredibly cheerful.
“Oh- okay-” Lance mumbled.
“Anyways, what I called you down here for- I’ve got breakfast ready for you, Lance. And Asher, you’re also going to school on the same day Lance is. You’ll both have to take the bus this year, but the schools are right next to each other.” She informed them. Asher wasn’t sure if he should feel excited or scared, but he liked the idea of learning, he’d just never really spent time around kids his age.
“Are we taking the same bus?” Lance questioned.
“Mhm.” She replied.
“Where do we have to go and at what time in the morning?”
“You go down the end of this street, then to the right for two blocks and wait by the stop sign and bike hold there, you’ll wanna be there around seven fifteen each morning.” She answered with a hum.
“Okay- thanks-” Lance then headed into the kitchen.
“Mama, does this mean I get a new backpack?” Asher asked quietly, and his mom smiled softly down at him.

“Yep, it does! You, me and Lance will go shopping for some new school supplies later, okay?” She replied.

A few days later, Lance came bursting into Asher’s room late one night.
“Asher- wake up!” He whisper shouted as he stood over Asher’s bed.
The young boy jolted awake and looked up at Lance with wide eyes.
“What-.. What’s going on?” He asked groggily.
“Look at my wings-” Lance said excitedly. Asher sat up and squinted in the dark to see- they looked like they were several different shades of red, orange, and yellow. He curiously reached out to touch one, and he felt a lot of warmth radiating from them- not the normal body heat, but almost hot warmth. But they were incredibly soft to the touch. He smiled a little as he sort of absent-mindedly pet them.
“They feel like clouds-” Asher said softly.
“Mhm! There’s no way I’m any normal bird though- they look and feel like fire- watch!” Lance said and tensed for a moment. His wings instantly lit up, and the feathers began to dance around like a flame. Asher was so mesmerized that he didn't think to pull his hand away- but it didn’t hurt, it actually felt nice- like just more of that comforting warmth. The “fire” curled around his fingers, causing him to giggle as it tickled a little.
“That’s so cool! Are you gonna tell mama tomorrow?” Asher asked.
“Yep- anyways, I just wanted to show you- goodnight, kid-” Lance ruffled Asher’s hair and turned to leave.
“Oh- goodnight, Lancy-” Asher replied. Lance paused and smiled a little at him before slipping out of the room and shutting the door.
The next morning, he headed downstairs to find Lance and their mother sitting at the dining room table in relative silence. Lance was looking down at the table, looking slightly ashamed, and his mom was currently wrapping her hand in bandages. Asher walked into the room and looked around with confusion.
“What happened..?” He asked quietly.
“Lance accidentally burnt me, but it’s alright! I called in someone who specializes in unique species like this-” His mom replied, and Lance just nodded a little.
“Oh… are you okay?” Asher asked softly and went to look at his mom.
“I’m fine, dear- please sit down while we wait.” She answered.
Asher nodded a bit and sat between Lance and her, glancing somewhat awkwardly between the two of them for a while.
He jumped a little as there was eventually a knock on the door- his mom went to answer it, and a sweet looking older woman came inside. She had a large pair of scaly wings and a lizard-like tail that stretched out behind her, all a deep crimson red in color.

“Oh hello, sweethearts- I’ve heard we might have a bit of a confusing problem here, hm? Well, my name is Melinda and I promise to take good care of you and explain everything-” The woman said sweetly, looking at Lance.
Melinda, Lance, and his mom had a very confusing conversation that Asher understood very little of, so he just zoned out for it. Eventually she started speaking in words Asher understood and was clearly trying to get his attention.
“Now, this is very important for the whole family, alright?” She said softly, and Asher nodded as well as his mom and Lance.
“Lance is a Phoenix, which is a bird- his care will be very similar to a bird, but he is very prone to fire. That means that hot things won’t hurt him, but it also means that his wings and eventually the tail feathers that will sprout are very hot. This is containable, when he’s calm or relaxed they will only be warm, but when emotions are high they will visibly look on fire and be about as hot. The thing is, even then he could touch them- others could too- but he has to trust and like that person very, very much for them to ever safely be able to touch his wings. Mom, you must understand that he likely accidentally burned you due to high emotions and still being relatively new to the house- try not to take offense if it happens again, he cannot control any of it and much of this is still being researched today. So essentially, avoid touching his wings- you don’t have to worry about anything being lit on fire, though- he’d need to be very emotional and want the things around him to burn for anything to catch ablaze-” Melinda explained.
Asher thought back on when he’d touched Lance’s wings, but he knew better than to mention it at this moment.
“Alright, thank you very much, Melinda- you are free to go now-” His mom said softly.
It was a bit of an adjustment after that, and Asher tried not to touch Lance’s wings, but whenever Lance was comforting Asher he’d wrap his wings around him and not once did Asher burn.
He took great pride in this, but he didn’t tell anyone about it or mention it- he was just beyond happy that his big brother trusted him so much. Other than that, they just had to begin getting ready to go back to school.

The first day of school didn’t go too bad- he was tired getting up that early, so Lance carried him all the way to the bus stop. They waited there for a few minutes before a bus pulled up and they found their seats in the back. It was cool, but very loud and he got overwhelmed quickly.
No one sat near them because of Lance’s wings, which glowed

particularly bright at the moment. Lance wrapped an arm around Asher, and Asher leaned into him for comfort. Lance seemed to not want to touch Asher with his wings though, which Asher was a bit confused by, but he didn't say or do anything about it. Once they got to the first stop, which was at Asher's school, Lance gave him a long hug as he said goodbye, then he and a couple other younger kids got off and headed to the school.

It was bright and cold inside, it instantly put Asher on edge- but his teacher was a very nice lady and his classmates were very friendly. Asher was lucky that at that point, kids were generally nicer. Asher always knew he was a little different than most others around him- he was quieter, and at that time he was much more trusting. He'd believe anything anyone told him blindly- a few kids took great joy in this fact and used it to tease him a little, but he didn't take it to heart too much.

Being at school was good for him, honestly- he didn't have to spend all day alone and he made a few friends, but he never got very close with any of them, just buddys at school and nowhere else.

Lance always seemed so happy to see Asher when they got back on the bus together, and Asher loved telling Lance everything he'd done at school that day. He couldn't help but wonder what Lance's school was like- he never talked about it and when asked he'd always give simple answers like "it was fine" and such.

Unfortunately though, life at home got a lot harder over those next few years.

His parents' favoritism for Lance began to wear off, and whenever their dad got angry he'd begin to take it out on Lance as he had sometimes been doing with Asher- shouting, hitting, and throwing things at both of the boys. One night was different, though.

Lance had been allowed to go to a friend's house for a few hours, so he didn't come home with Asher. His dad was drinking that smelly juice again and had started hitting and throwing things at Asher, who was currently curled up against the wall of the living room, already bruised and his legs scraped up from the broken glass on the floor. He was sobbing and covering his face and head with his arms while his dad shouted at him.

His mom hadn't even tried to stop him- she'd had some "adult candy" as she called it earlier, and wasn't even in the room anymore.

The door suddenly flung open and Lance stormed inside, glaring at their dad. He was only fourteen now, but he was still so tall for his age and due to being interested in some sports, he was growing quite fit too, and him bursting into the room like this startled Asher too much for him to think to run to Lance.

"Ohhh look who's f'nally fuckin home!" His dad shouted, his voice

slurring with anger as he stumbled towards Lance, tossing his arms up in a big display.
“Leave me and Asher alone.” Lance hissed- there was something different in his voice today- he never sounded like this, and it scared Asher.
“Or wh’t? What're you g’nna do ab’t it??” The man demanded, raising a hand to smack Lance.
Lance slapped his hand away with his flaming hot wing- the colors would sometimes change based on mood, and right now they were yellow, almost white- they must’ve been really hot.
Their dad stumbled back, nearly falling to the floor and screaming as he clutched his arm. Asher couldn’t bring himself to look at the injury- he just curled up in a tighter ball until he felt warm arms wrap around him.
He stiffened a little and looked out from behind his hands to see Lance scooping him up and basically running up the stairs.
Lance ran to his own room and shut the door, quickly going to curl up on his bed. He wrapped his wings around Asher- they were still glowing and very pale, but they didn’t burn him. They were warm, but it was comforting on his bruising skin.
He sobbed as he clung onto Lance, who stroked his hair and tried desperately to comfort him.
“Hey, shh… it’s okay kid…” Lance whispered, hugging Asher tighter.
He kept whispering to Asher, and eventually that helped him calm down.
Asher had recently taken to “shutting off” his head, as he had that one night so long ago, whenever he was distressed. With Lance he never needed to, it felt much nicer when Lance comforted him normally, but alone he needed to self soothe and it was so much easier to use this newfound ability to just block it all out.
Eventually he began to calm down, and Lance did too. He helped Asher patch up all of his cuts and put ice over the worst of the bruises, but not much more could be done.
Asher stayed in Lance’s room that night, and both were glad it was a Friday that day.
Of course, questions were asked when Asher went to school Monday- the bruises looked horrible at that point and were still quite sore, but most of them could be covered with his clothes.
Asher’s mom had told him exactly what to tell everyone, which was that he’d been roughhousing and fell off the couch into a wall.
That’s what he told anyone who asked, and most of the adults seemed to believe him.

Chapter End Notes

I have to reread each chapter before posting to fix any spelling mistakes and stuff, and it is physically painful because of how long ago I wrote this stuff and I keep cringing, I'm so sorry and I hope others can see this work better than I do rn

New additions

Chapter Summary

I get to poorly describe a child undergoing intense physical changes and everyone treats it like it's totally normal, because for most people in this universe it is :D
Also, this chapter is a little shorter compared to the others so I'm going to try and post another one later today

Chapter Notes

So, I've just realized that for the last two chapters everything that was supposed to be in italics isn't, I apologize for that! I didn't realize you needed to change it to "Rich Text" when pasting words, so I did that and I think it changed the formatting a little bit, sorry for the sudden change!!

Things were different after that- Lance never let things go too far when their dad was “drunk”- Lance told him that’s a word to describe what was going on when their parents got like that.

Lance would always stop both of their parents from hurting Asher whenever he could- sometimes Lance would go to that same friend's house and things would happen anyways, but not often. Asher was so glad to have Lance in his life- his appreciation grew as he got older and started to understand more.

Once he turned ten, he’d started spending a lot more time with his mother, oddly enough. He still yearned for her praise, for her increasingly rare bits of kindness- but she seemed to be doing a little better for herself lately. They spent more time together and bonded over things, even going out to the mall sometimes like they used to when Asher was younger.

School was a lot different, though. Asher began to understand why Lance was always so quiet. The kids had gotten meaner, and even those he grew up being relatively friendly with had begun to turn on him. It changed Asher, he became much less trusting and often lied about school to Lance, saying it was better than it was.

One day, Asher and his mom were hanging out alone at home- Lance

had been at a friend's house. He learned that the friend's name was Dexter and he was in Lance's class. He'd never gotten to properly meet Dexter yet, though- but Lance seemed to like him a lot.

While he and his mom were watching a movie, he started to get this odd feeling. It was like something under his skin was shifting and it was very uncomfortable.

He kept moving around in his seat trying to get comfortable when suddenly there was an agonizing pain shot through his back- not just one part of it, but like his entire spine and muscles were all being broken or shredded all at once.

He shouted from surprise and pain as he curled up in a ball, tears welling in his eyes.

The next few minutes were a blur as the pain was completely blinding and deafening, his mom kept trying to talk to him but he just *couldn't* hear her or seem to respond with anything but pained screams.

He began to black out, and the next thing he knew he was in a freezing room and it was so bright that it hurt to open his eyes. He was in pain all over, but it was a more dull pain now- sort of like being covered in bruises, it was familiar enough that he could almost just ignore it.

He squinted to try and adjust to the light, but all he could see was a plain white ceiling. It looked sort of similar to his school ceiling- those foam squares being held up with plastic lines, but the ones here were a more pure white while the ones at school had a bunch of black and gray speckles for whatever reason.

He started to look around a little once he was no longer blinded, and he saw a doctor nearby looking over some tubes and computers that seemed to be hooked up to something near him.

Until he looked down at his arm and saw that they were actually hooked up to *him* , which was a little uncomfortable to realize.

"What happened..?" He mumbled. The doctor looked over and smiled a little, but there was a great look of concern in her eyes.

"Oh, so good to see you're awake Asher- your momma is so worried for you-" The doctor spoke softly.

"Why-... why am I here?" He asked.

“Well- your body tried to transform, to grow your extra animal appendages- but unfortunately you’re just too small, it took everything out of you to do it. That’s a problem we have seen a lot in children who do this before the age of twelve- it just means that you need fluids and a closely monitored appetite for a few days- unfortunately something seemed to go wrong when your wings came out, and it caused you to lose a lot of blood. Now normally we’d have the parent or parents in the room with you for this, but we thought it was important for you to know exactly what you are first-” The doctor explained, her tone softening at the end.

“What-... what am I..?” Asher asked, now nervous.

“You are- well- a dragon- but not a normal one- here, let me get you a mirror-” She replied and headed to the bathroom attached to the hospital room.

She brought out a little handheld mirror and used it to help show Asher a pair of wings, and his tail. All of them were in this sort of gray lavender tinted color- he liked the color, but he was absolutely terrified. He had only ever heard of so many dragons in his life, and he was already being ridiculed at school, so how much would he be picked on now?

His wings were pretty big too- he himself was only about four feet tall, and his wingspan was likely more than double that- but from what he understood, most animals with wings had a wingspan about twice as long as their bodies.

His tail was long too- it was a good bit longer than his legs so he’d have to get used to lifting it when he walked. He was dreading any of that because right now he couldn’t move any one of his new extra limbs.

He reached up to touch one of his wings, and was surprised at how *soft* it was, like those expensive velvets or silks.

Everything about this was weird, and it was starting to freak him out.

“Is there anything I can do for you, dear..? Do you want your mom to come in now…?” The doctor asked, seeming to notice his oncoming panic.

“I- can- can you just t-tell her and- is Lance here..?” Asher asked quietly. He felt bad for preferring Lance’s presence over his own mothers, but she had been drinking a little and was going to overreact

to everything- he just wanted to feel the comforting embrace of his brother.

“I don’t believe so, but I will ask your mom to bring him, okay?” The doctor smiled a bit and stepped out of the room. He just stared up at the ceiling with teary eyes, scratching at his arms with his nails.

He could hear many things happening out in the hall- people shouting, running by, other patients in emergencies- and for a short time, his mom shouting at the doctors. Luckily that ended quickly, and he was able to tune everything else out.

It felt like an eternity before that door opened again- he looked over when it did and saw the doctor standing with a very panicked looking Lance.

“Asher! Oh thank god you’re okay-” Lance ran over to him and looked him over. He just limply reached out for Lance’s hand- he quickly held Asher’s hand back, and that’s when Asher realized his nails were coated in dry blood. He cringed a little and looked at Lance for his reaction- he looked even more worried as he watched Asher.

“The doctor told me what happened… How are you feeling?” Lance asked softly.

“It still hurts a little-... but- they’re really soft- feel them-” Asher mumbled. Lance hesitated before he tentatively reached out to caress one of Asher’s wings- there was an instantaneous wave of calm that washed over him upon contact. It felt like he was floating, and nothing else mattered- it was so comforting that it almost felt painful when Lance removed his hand.

“They are soft… does it hurt when I touch them?” Lance asked, and Asher shook his head a little.

“Alright, I need to go speak with your mother again- you two have already met Melinda, haven’t you?” The doctor softly interjected.

“Yes, we have- she helped me when I shifted-” Lance replied.

“Good, I’ll send her in then- she’s already been informed, but she had to do a bit more research-” She said and then stepped out.

“... How mad is mom..?” Asher asked quietly.

“She’s-... well, you know- she’ll cope- I think she was just hoping

you'd be a bird too-" Lance replied softly.

"Okay… I feel bad I didn't want her to come in here to see me- I'm just- really tired…" Asher whispered.

"I know, kid… it's okay- you deserve some rest." Lance mumbled.

"Sorry… I hope you didn't have to leave Dexter to come here-..." Asher mumbled.

"Oh, no- I already left his house- it's- do you know what time it is?" Lance asked, and Asher shook his head.

"It's like- four in the morning- I came home in the evening and couldn't find you or get ahold of mom- I was worried and couldn't sleep, and dad came home drunk again so he was no help-" Lance told him.

"Oh… I didn't mean to worry you so much-..." Asher whispered.

"It's not at all your fault, kid- I promise-" Lance replied, carefully running a hand through Asher's hair. Asher smiled a bit and leaned into his hand, his eyes drifting shut.

"Can we turn off some of the lights in here…?" Asher asked quietly.

"I'll shut them off, but the doctor is probably going to turn them back on and wake you up when Melinda comes in…" Lance replied.

"Okay… thank you-" Asher said as Lance got up and turned off the lights.

Finally at peace, Asher was soon able to doze off to sleep. Lance was right, though- it felt like only a matter of minutes before the lights were flicked on again and he was abruptly woken up.

"Good morning, Asher-" The doctor said. He opened his eyes to see Lance had pulled a chair up next to the bed, and the doctor had brought Melinda into the room. He sighed tiredly and slowly sat up.

"Careful, Asher- you're still a little faint-" The doctor said quickly. He wasn't really sure how he was supposed to be careful sitting up, so with his sleepy brain he just nodded a little.

"Hello, dear- it seems I'm going to be spending quite the amount of time with you two, hm?" Melinda said with a little light-hearted laugh.

“Yes, well- hopefully there aren’t any incidents that make it so you need to come urgently-” Lance mumbled in reply.

“I don’t see any particular reason why there should be- anyways, would you like some tea, Asher? I need you to be awake for everything I’m about to say,” Melinda asked as she pulled up another chair to sit in.

“Uh- sure-..” Asher mumbled, and she handed him a warm mug of tea. He sipped it slowly- it tasted odd, but it was pretty good. It was a little sweet too, and after a few minutes he was starting to feel a little more awake.

“Alright, are you ready?” Melinda asked softly after a moment, and Asher nodded in response.

“Now, obviously I know the basics about dragons, being one myself- but you are quite a peculiar case, my dear. I will tell you what I was able to find, but ultimately a lot of this is up in the air. From what I understand, you aren’t heat resistant like I am- you may be more sensitive to weather than others, actually. I’m not sure if you will ever be able to produce fire, but there’s a small chance you could make something else such as ice or electricity, so just be careful when you feel yourself becoming angry or detached. As for your wing and tail care, it’s going to look a little different than caring for wings with feathers- you’ll need brushes that mammals would use for fur, so that none of your fur becomes matted. But, like with birds, you’ll need to stretch them to grow the muscles- Lance and your mother should be able to help you with that. I think there’s a very good chance you’ll be able to fly, likely quite fast- but not for long distances. It’s hard to know without seeing how they grow, but right now you have a very aerodynamic shape and your wings are quite large for your body size- if it all stays that way, you’ll be a speedy flier but not a long distance one, as it will use up too much energy for you- and your tail should help you turn with very good agility. I would say for now just be careful with everything, and reach out to me if you have any questions or concerns as you grow, alright?” Melinda said with a smile. Asher felt like his head was spinning, but he just nodded a little.

“Okay, thank you Melinda-” He said quietly.

She left shortly after that, and then his mom came in and they had to explain all of that to her as well.

I'm so sorry

Chapter Summary

> Okay, so this chapter is where the story starts to get pretty heavy, so I'm going to include a list of trigger warnings. This is where more of the angst and stuff starts, so lots of the chapters after this are going to be just as heavy/brutal as this one is.
> Trigger warnings for this chapter: Suicide attempt, Child manipulation, I mean an almost adult character makes an 11-year-old talk him down from a roof, lots of tears and begging happen, its worse the more you think about it. I hope that mostly covers it, I just don't want anyone not knowing what they're getting into

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He spent the next few days in the hospital resting, but luckily it was over winter break, so he wasn't missing any school. Lance spent every possible second with Asher, which was nice- they hadn't spent that much time together in ages. Even his mom was trying to spend more quality time with him, she was being so genuine now.

His father was clearly very upset about his wings, and he heard from Lance that he and their mom were fighting a lot more recently. He hoped they would stop by the time he went home, but of course they hadn't.

And when he went back to school, some of his most frequent bullies began picking on him for his "scrappy" wings. He tried to pretend it didn't hurt- it was easier when he just blanked out and ignored everything.

Of course, that made it so he didn't really remember much of his school days. He'd get on the bus and Lance would ask how his day was, and he'd have to make things up- he ensured Lance always thought his school life was nice, peaceful.

Lance didn't need to worry himself with Asher, he had more important things to focus on.

Speaking of, eventually Lance invited Asher to go hang out with him and Dexter- they were going to an arcade, and Asher was quick to agree.

The day of, he got ready and waited for Lance- it was maybe six in the evening now and they planned to meet up soon. Lance could drive now, but their parents wouldn't let him take either of the two cars they had- so they were going to have to take the public bus.

They walked to the bus stop holding hands, and found their seats somewhere away from all of the sketchy looking people.

"This is our stop-" Lance said eventually, once they pulled up to a little cluster of buildings with random shops and the arcade. They both got up and left the bus, walking out onto the sidewalk and heading towards the arcade.

"It looks like we're running a bit late- Dex is probably already here-" Lance mumbled, glancing at his phone.

"Okay- thanks for bringing me with you, Lan-" Asher said with a smile. Lance ruffled his hair and smiled back at him.

"Of course, kid-" Lance replied as they headed into the building. It was dim inside and filled with the sounds of various games running. It was a little busy, but luckily nothing too overwhelming.

They spotted Dexter pretty quickly- he was a tall, thin man with black fox ears and a bright red tail. He had red hair and bright green eyes- he looked oddly trusting. They had a pretty good time together, Dexter was surprisingly nice to Asher after how everyone else his own or even Lance's age treated him, and Lance was clearly quite happy.

After that, the three of them hanging out became a pretty regular thing. When Asher got a phone he'd even gotten Dexter's number, but they never really hung out without Lance.

They talked a lot over text or call late at night, after Lance was asleep. Asher grew very tired very quickly, but he felt bad not hanging out with Dexter- he opened up to Asher a lot about being depressed and having a ready hard time.

One night in particular was really bad- Dexter had been texting Asher on and off that day with really cryptic things such as "I just think no

one really likes me", "I wish I was never born", or "sometimes I think my parents would be better off without me".
Asher tried to convince him that wasn't true, but he wasn't responding to most of Asher's countless texts- he even got in trouble for having his phone out at school.

That night after dinner he realized he hadn't heard from Dexter in a few hours, and when he asked Lance he'd seemed confused but said he hadn't heard from him either. Asher tried to convince him nothing was wrong, but they had just been mid conversation and Dexter ghosted him. Dexter always asked Asher not to tell Lance about his issues, so Asher didn't.

He knew he'd feel horrible if anyone told Lance about any of the issues he'd had at school recently, like getting into minor fights or skipping classes.

He couldn't sleep after that, just kept tossing and turning in bed from worry.

Finally he'd heard his phone ring- he grabbed it and answered as soon as he saw that it was Dexter calling.

"Dexter- hello? Is everything okay?" He asked quickly, but quietly so that no one else in the house would hear him.

Though he was sure they were all fast asleep anyway.

"Hey, Asher…" Dexter mumbled. Something sounded off- his voice was slurring a little and there was a somewhat loud background sound of wind, like he was standing outside.

"What's going on? Why haven't you been texting me back?" Asher pressed, moving into his closet so he could talk at a more normal volume.

"I-... I think I'm gonna just- make everyone happy and end it…" Dexter said quietly into the phone, and Asher felt his blood run cold. It felt like his heart dropped right down to his stomach, heavy as a stone, and his hands trembled as he realized that it had been far too long to not have responded.

"What- what do you mean? Where are you-?" It felt like his throat dried up and he had to choke out each word.

"I'm up on the roof… there's uh- there's a metal fence with those

sharp bits below me… I bet if I jumped on it just right I could die pretty quick, huh…?" Dexter muttered.

"No- nononononono don't do that- Hang on I'll- are you at your house? I can walk there- don't jump off the roof Dexter, please-" Asher's voice took on a more pleading tone as he felt himself quickly start to panic. He felt *helpless* - what could he do from here if Dexter didn't listen to him- what if everyone blamed him for not being able to stop Dexter??

"Oh god, it doesn't matter anyways!" Dexter's voice broke, it sounded like he was crying now.

"No one's gonna miss me, I'm just gonna do it- I'm so tired of being a burden to *everyone* -!" He shouted.

"No- Dexter you're not a burden- please don't do it- I'll be there in a minute just- just stay put okay?" Asher begged, slipping out of his room and basically running down to the front door.

"Don't even bother- even my parents want me gone, Asher!" Dexter replied- he sounded like he was getting angry now, which scared Asher- but not as much as he was afraid of what would happen if he didn't stop Dexter. He trembled from the bitter cold now as he ran as fast as he could to Dexter's house- he was just eleven years old, and here he was running to prevent a seventeen year old from killing himself.

"That's not true, Lance would miss you so much! *I* would miss you, your girlfriend would miss you- Please, Dexter!" Asher shouted back, tears slipping down his cheeks as he ran as hard as he could.

There was a long silence after that, and Asher was terrified that Dexter had really done it.

"Dex? Dexter! Please answer me- Dexter please-" His voice shook as he got more and more desperate. It was only a minute now until he'd make it to Dexter's house- his entire body ached from the cold and he was struggling to breathe from running so hard.

He could barely feel his fingers as he rounded the corner, and at the same time he heard the sound of the phone hanging up.

"No no no! Damnit, please-" He pleaded quietly as he rapidly approached Dexter's house. He came to a screeching halt in front of it, and he quickly spotted the ladder Dexter had probably used to get up there. He climbed up as quick as his shaky, numb limbs would let

him- Dexter lived in a two story house, and Asher realized very quickly that he wasn't on any of the small strips of the first floor roofs, so he had to figure out how on earth to climb up onto the second story one.

"Dexter!" He shouted as he stumbled around, trying to find a way up. He didn't hear a verbal response, and maybe it was just his ears playing tricks on him but he could *swear* he heard movement up there.

He used a windowsill to climb up, flapping his wings hard to give himself an extra boost and fully climb up on top of the roof. He saw Dexter sitting up there on the opposite end of the roof, his legs dangling over the edge as he stared down. Asher practically ran over, almost falling a few times.

"Dexter! Oh my god, please get away from there-" He begged as he knelt down a few feet behind Dexter.

The older boy looked back at Asher, and he could tell he'd been crying.

"What's even the point..? No one wants me around…" Dexter mumbled.

"I do! Lance does- please, Dexter- please don't do this-" Asher responded, inching closer to Dexter. Dexter suddenly swung around and grabbed Asher's wrist, causing him to freeze up.

"We should go together- you're like me, no one understands us- no one would miss us- you're just as useless as I am!" Dexter said, now sounding oddly excited. Dexter sounded so much like Asher's mom now- his words stung, just like hers did, but Asher knew they must be true if these people he trusted *so much* were the ones saying them.

"I- I can't, Dexter- I'm scared- can we *please* go back inside…?" Asher asked quietly, and Dexter frowned.

"I knew you didn't care about me… no one does- I thought you were my only *real* friend…" Dexter said bitterly.

"As your friend, I- I just don't want to see you get hurt! *Please* come down with me- I'll- I'll do *anything* , please just don't do this-" Asher's voice broke, but finally- *finally* Dexter seemed to reconsider.

"Okay, fine… I'll- I won't do it, for now…" Dexter mumbled and

slowly moved away from the edge. Relief flooded into Asher's veins like a drug as he carefully helped Dexter climb down and onto the safety of the ground.

“You- you need to go inside and maybe wake your parents up, okay..?” Asher said softly.

“No way- they’d send me away…” Dexter muttered.

“... Okay just- *promise* me you won’t try to do that again tonight..? Please?” Asher pleaded.

“... I’ll- I’ll try-” Dexter replied.

“Okay… text me- I’ll text you when I get home, and when I wake up and- and if you don’t respond I’ll tell Lance I’m worried about you- please respond whenever you can-” Asher said firmly.

“Okay, sure…” Dexter mumbled and headed inside. Asher sighed and after the front door was shut and locked, he went over to the ladder still leaning against the roof. He knocked it down and dragged it over to hide in some bushes, then he began the walk home.

He ran here pretty quick, but he was completely out of energy now and essentially just stumbled his way back home.

When he got there, it must’ve been around four in the morning- just a few hours before he’d have to get up again for school. He collapsed into bed and passed out instantly.

The next morning he woke up to Lance shaking him awake and shouting his name.

“Asher wake up! We missed the bus-” Lance said in a frantic voice. Asher groggily sat up, his tired brain not fully understanding what was going on.

“What..?” He mumbled.

“Get up and get dressed! We missed the bus because you overslept!” Lance shouted, anger slipping into his tone for a moment. That got Asher up- Lance was hardly ever angry.

He flew out of bed and into the closet to change- he didn’t even have time to brush his teeth or hair or anything as Lance grabbed his hand and dragged him out the front door, saying something about needing

to walk to school. He was so tired he could barely keep his eyes open and kept falling behind as he tripped over his own feet.

“Asher, try to keep up! Why are you so damn tired?? What were you up doing last night that was so much more important than school?” Lance lectured him the whole way to school- Asher was too out of it to understand most of what he said, but he registered that Lance was mad at him, and it gave him that feeling like he had a pit in the bottom of his stomach and like he’d done something horribly wrong.

When he felt the tears begin to burn his tired eyes, for the first time around Lance he just sort of shut everything down, slipping into that comfortable state of non-existence again.

The rest of the school day was hellish- he had to get a late pass for his first class, and his teacher lectured him in front of the entire class for it. During lunch he realized he hadn’t texted Dexter like he said he would- at least he didn’t feel the intense anxiety from that right now. He pulled out his phone and texted

“I’m so sorry I forgot to text you, Dexter. Are you okay? I’m sorry”

He got a response a few minutes later saying

“I’m okay, I guess.”

Asher sighed and just put his phone down. Dexter was alive, and he was with Lance now so Asher didn’t have to worry so much about him.

He left the lunchroom, taking one last glance at his phone to see if Dexter texted anything else- and in that moment that he was looking down he’d bumped into someone from a year up, who happened to pick on him quite a bit.

That wasn’t fun- he got a little “roughed up”, as the adults like to put it- which meant he had more bruises to hide. They were mostly on his stomach, though- so pretty easy to just not take off his shirt around Lance.

He got onto the bus that evening, his messy hair was covering his face and his equally messy wings were tucked close to his body, still burning a little from being yanked during the assault.

He stumbled to the back of the bus, being knocked around by a few people until he found Lance in their usual spot. Lance was just staring

out the window- he looked mildly pissed off. Asher sat next to him and just stared at the ground.

The trip home was uncomfortably silent until they stepped through the front door- neither of their parents were home yet.

“Seriously, Asher. What on *earth* were you doing last night??” Lance demanded- he sounded even more mad now. Something about that broke Asher, like the last straw on the camel's back- Lance had been mad at him and seething over this all day, Asher’s teacher was mad at him, his classmates hated him, and Dexter was disappointed with him. He snapped out of his disconnected state so much quicker than he thought he could when he felt tears welling in his eyes, and he just *broke* .

“I couldn’t sleep because Dexter was trying to kill himself, and I was trying so hard to stop him and- and when I came home it was almost time to get ready for school and then you woke me up just so I could be a failure from home to school, and now you’re *still* mad at because I can’t do anything right! I just want to go home and *sleep* -” Asher rambled, his words broken up between that unsteady breathing before you just break into full on sobs. He realized something though- he *is* home- so why doesn’t it feel that way?

Lance stared at him, his stern expression slowly melting away as he just looked confused and worried.

“... What??” He asked after a long moment of silence.

“I- I wasn’t s-supposed to te-tell you-” Asher’s voice trembled and he turned to walk away up the stairs, wrapping his arms around himself.

“Asher- wait-” Lance mumbled as he followed Asher up the stairs and into his room. Asher fell into bed and curled up in a ball, tears streaming down his face as he closed his eyes.

“No- kid, what are you talking about?? Dexter tried to off himself-??” Lance asked quickly.

“He made me promise not to tell you, Lance… please don’t say anything to him… please…” Asher whispered.

“I- why would he tell you that and not me??”

“Because you’ve got enough to worry about… neither of us wants to bother you with stuff like that-....” Asher mumbled.

“I don’t- I don’t understand, Asher hang on-” Lance set a hand on Asher’s shoulder, causing him to flinch a little.

“‘M tired… just let me sleep…” Asher pleaded. Lance didn’t say anything else after that- he just slipped out of the room a moment later, leaving Asher to fall asleep feeling like the worst piece of shit on earth right now.

He had a very uneasy sleep that night, and he woke up at around three in the morning that night.

He knew he likely wouldn’t be able to fall back asleep any time soon, so he sat up and grabbed his phone. He cringed at all the countless texts and calls left by Dexter- there were over thirty messages and they were all ranging from him being pissed off about Asher telling Lance, then apologizing for being angry- the last text was sent about an hour ago that said

“I just can’t believe you would betray my trust like that. I trusted you and you do the one thing I asked you not to, now my parents are wanting to send me to therapy. Thanks a lot, I fucking hate you”

Tears welled in his eyes as he read that. His fingers flew across the screen as he quickly wrote a response.

“I’m so sorry, Dexter. Lance was asking me questions and I was so tired and worried I couldn’t think straight, I didn’t mean for him to tell your parents or talk to you about it. I’m sorry, please don’t stop being friends with Lance because of this”

His hands shook as he hit the send button, but even after hours he didn’t receive a text back. Days later over the weekend, Lance told Asher that he was going to see Dexter again. Asher had been quite miserable throughout the week- and Lance had been distant with him, they hadn’t talked again about the incident from before. Asher could feel the rift forming between them, sensing the tension beneath Lance’s movements.

That night Dexter came back to their house- mainly because their parents weren’t home.

Asher was in his room- he’d been there pretty much the entire day even after everyone else left. He’d found that not eating was a good punishment for himself when he's done something wrong, and it was easier to do that when there was no food around- plus he got tired much more easily now for some reason. He essentially just spent the

whole day stretching his wings and tidying up his room.

He laid in bed that night after he'd heard Dexter and Lance go to sleep, but he just couldn't fall asleep. He sat up as he heard his door being quietly pushed open- he was a little startled to find Dexter walking in and shutting the door behind himself. He climbed out of bed, his hands shaking as he inhaled deeply.

"Dexter- I'm so so sor–" He was cut off as Dexter suddenly slapped him. Without even a sound, he fell to the floor and clutched his face, looking up at Dexter with wide and now tear-filled eyes.

"Shut the hell up. You *ruined* my life- do you understand that??" Dexter hissed, clearly trying not to wake Lance up by being too loud.

"I- I'm s-sorry- I didn't mean–" Asher started, but Dexter raised a hand like he was going to hit him to silence him- it worked, after all his dad had trained him so well to respond to violence.

"It's going to take a fucking *lot* to make me forgive you." Dexter said firmly.

Chapter End Notes

> Sooo I suck at writing angst like that, and super high-tension scenes. If you've got any tips for me for making scenes like that better, please tell me them because I cried trying to read that

Your fault

Chapter Summary

> So this chapter is a little wild, I'm sorry, and so it probably needs some trigger warnings to go with it.
> Warnings include but are not limited to: Heavy blood and gore, murder, knives, domestic violence, intense dissociation, overall just a lot of trauma, I mean a character dies so just tread with caution.

And it certainly did take a lot. After that, Asher was nothing more than a pawn under Dexter's thumb- heeding his every beck and call and when he so much as hesitated, Dexter was quick to remind him who was in charge with either physical violence, or threats of suicide.

This spiraled Asher into a horrible state- his mental health was at an all time low and he truly believed he was the problem in every scenario. Lance wasn't helping much- not like he really used to before. He was still there for him in all the ways he used to, protecting him from their parents and such- but he was so much less genuine about it than he used to be.

Asher forced himself not to rely on Lance so much- which meant he relied a lot more on their mom. After Lance turned eighteen, their dad wanted to kick him out- but their mom allowed him to stay as long as he didn't cause any issues. Asher started spending much more time with her after all the horrible, creepy and uncomfortably physical things Dexter did.

She seemed annoyed most of the time, but whenever she was sober she seemed to genuinely enjoy his company. He was always anxious though, he was picking at his nails a lot because of it, which often caused them to bleed- or scratching at his arms, he did that much less though. But no one bothered to ask him about it- not even Lance.

Something about that was oddly empowering- like he had finally found something he had control over.

He was only fourteen when one of the worst nights of his life would come.

Lance had been over at Dexter's house, their mom was getting drunk in the kitchen while Asher waited for her to come watch a movie, and

his dad came home soon after. He practically busted in the door and came in- he was very obviously drunk. Asher jumped up and quickly moved to the opposite side of the room, near the stairs.

“Damn you f’ckin w’men! I kn’w ye’d- F’ck!” He shouted a bunch of unintelligible words as he stumbled into the kitchen.

“What the hell are you blabbering on about??” His mom shouted back, grabbing her bottle of wine off the counter. His dad hit her so hard that she dropped the bottle and it shattered onto the ground. He nearly jumped out of his skin when that happened- but it was like watching a train wreck, he just couldn’t force himself to look away.

She shouted out in shock and swung to hit him back- he grabbed her wrist and finally spoke words that made sense- he sounded bone-chillingly sober in that one second.

“I *knew* you fucking cheated on me.” He spat, throwing her back against the counter.

“What- what are you talking about??” Her eyes went wide with panic as she stumbled away from him, trying to get around him and out of the kitchen.

She looked like a trapped animal, panicking and fighting for her life in some inescapable snare.

“You know *damn well* what I’m talking about, woman!” He shouted- and just then he did something that made Asher’s blood feel like a frozen river inside his veins. He watched in slow motion as his father grabbed a knife from the kitchen drawer, and held it up- pointing at his mom.

Asher wasn’t sure why his brain sometimes clung on to specific details, but this time as he was stuck there, completely frozen, his mind latched onto the details of the knife. The would-be weapon used on one of the most important people in his life.

It wasn't a particularly large knife, not like the large chefs knife a killer would use in the movies.

Just a short, sharp knife best used for cutting fruits.

“Dad, no!” He shrieked, suddenly jolting forward without a thought and tackling his father. The man swung around, mildly stunned as he tried to throw Asher off of himself. In the process the knife dragged

hard against Asher's chest, slicing deep into his skin with such a quick movement. He yelped from the pain as he fell back, his shirt was torn and blood instantly began seeping into the fabric.

Just from the suddenness of it, and likely his malnutrition, he immediately felt dizzy and light-headed, and sort of like he wanted to throw up. The world was spinning and he couldn't see anything- he was only snapped back from the sounds of his moms horrible, blood curdling scream.

The cold tiles below him send shudders deep into his bones, encasing him in nothing but pain, an icy chill, and deep, unrelenting terror.

He stumbled to his feet to see his dad hunched over her- he was removing the knife from her torso and stabbing it back into her repeatedly in quick succession. Crimson blood dripped from the corners of her mouth, it splattered onto the floor, it was *flooding* the room.

Her now mangled organs were spilling out of each new open wound on her body, which was beginning to look like some kind of horrible ground meat as his father kept stabbing the blade into her.

It was horrific, her pleas and cries had turned into nothing but guttural moans of pain as the life bled out of her, along with all of her vital innards.

As if watching the scene play out on a movie, he heard himself shouting at him to stop- he watched himself, with no real control, grab the phone and call the cops.

He wasn't even sure how he knew to do that, and he hardly remembered the conversation. All he remembered was hyperventilating on the phone, where he was curled up in the corner of the kitchen and frantically trying to explain what was going on through his hysterical sobs.

By the time the operator had finally confirmed she sent someone out, Asher's moms noises had reduced to nothing but faint wheezing.

He was pretty sure she was trying to look at him, but she was so coated in splatters of her own blood, and in such dim lighting, that he couldn't even see if her eyes were open or not.

His father had finally stopped the brutal attack at that point, slowly standing up and walking away in such an odd fashion, like he wasn't

doing anything on his own volition.

Only then did Asher toss the phone aside, ignoring the sound of the woman on the other end trying to call out to him. Instead he inched closer to his mothers side, feeling wave after wave of nausea as he crawled through the gradually spreading pool of *her blood* to get to her.

His shoulders heaved as he shakily grabbed her hand, clinging on to any hope that she might make it through this. She gave no response, no sound, no movement, and in that moment he knew she was gone.

He was moving again, without ever telling himself to. He was grabbing the knife from where it lay, discarded.

He felt sick holding it, his hands trembled and his vision blurred in and out and he just wanted it all to *stop, stop stop stop stop stop–*

He sort of blacked out at that moment, and the next thing he knew he was sitting down on the couch in his living room and being questioned by a police officer.

He remained in this sort of dazed, incoherent state as the cops questioned, countless people swarmed the house- he was so out of it that he was fairly convinced he didn't actually respond to anyone.

Then, Lance came home. He looked up at the door as his big brother opened it- his face pale and his expression was beyond worried as he rushed over to Asher. Asher was sitting on the couch wrapped up in a blanket right now- he'd grabbed it so no one would see the wound on his chest, which still sent pulsing pains through his body. He was so covered in blood from the gruesome scene in the kitchen that no one questioned why there was more, but surely they knew.

Or maybe he'd already had the wound treated, he wasn't really sure.

Lance knelt in front of him on the couch- he was saying something, maybe asking a question- but the whole world was so muffled and tuned out right now. He couldn't hear a word anyone said, like they were all underwater. Then there was a bright light suddenly shining in his eyes, and somehow that snapped something in him.

Somehow being flung into a rapid fight or flight response, he sprung up off the couch and released the blanket as he turned to run up the stairs. Several people- cops maybe- tried to stop him, but he somehow managed to duck and dodge past everyone.

He might have shouted for them to leave him alone, but he wasn't sure, everything was a blur as he ran into his room and threw the door shut, locking it before anyone managed to catch up to him. He was hyperventilating again as he stumbled over to the window.

It was a two story drop down to the ground, but it was onto grass, and no one was in the backyard right now. He heard a loud, almost frantic knocking behind him- in his frenzy, it sounded like the knocking was going to break down the door- it felt like it was shaking the entire house. He shook with a sob as he opened the window and climbed out, falling down hard onto his feet. It hurt *badly* , a new pain blossoming in his ankles and spreading up his legs. He almost stopped, but something in him was *pushing* to keep running.

And so he did.

He climbed over the fence and ran out into the street- it was flooded with cop cars and a few people, but under the cover of darkness no one seemed to notice him as he began to run away from the house.

He didn't even know where he was going- but one way or another he ended up in the woods a few blocks away from his house. He had stopped running by now- just sort of stumbling around blindly as he started to feel himself passing out. He slumped against a tree and slid down to the ground, the world went black around him as he felt his consciousness slip away.

That was probably the worst day of his life- the memories of his mother lived permanently in his head after that. Some cops in a search party had found Asher early the next morning- apparently leaving a blood trail was something you shouldn't do when running away.

He honestly could never explain his actions that night- not even in therapy weeks later, being forced to relive the event twice a week.

Somehow his dad didn't end up going to jail- Asher was so tuned out of life at that point he didn't really understand how. Lance for the first time in maybe a year or more was trying *so hard* to spend time with Asher- to get the boy to tell him *anything* - but Asher was done trying. He had tried so hard to get any of Lance's affection, any of his old care or comfort or attention, and it was all in vain.

Lance couldn't give him the time of day for so long- he had no right to act like Asher was his moon and stars again now. The only thing Asher

felt like this whole experience taught him was how to be angry at life rather than trying to find out what he was doing wrong in it.

Asher always knew he was different- he knew he came out *wrong* . He knew that deep down, no one could truly love him. He just had to come to terms with that, and instead of trying to change it he just had to let everyone know that he finally realized it so they would quit lying to him.

He'd just gotten out of therapy one Tuesday evening- Lance usually drove him to and from these appointments. Today when Asher opened the back door of the car, Lance stopped him.

"Hey, kid- I think you're old enough to sit up front with me now-" Lance said, forcing a little half-hearted smile. Asher just silently went around to the other side of the car, climbing into the passenger seat without any other sort of reaction. He was so *numb* .

"So… how was it? Any better this week?" Lance asked softly.

"No, Lance. My mom is still dead. Talking to an overpaid old lady isn't ever going to make me feel better." Asher snapped, but his voice was so dull. He wanted to sound angry, but instead he just sounded *broken* .

"You could always talk to me, you know..?" He replied. There it was- Lance always had this particular tone that just tore down Asher's walls every. Fucking. Time. He was usually able to just shut down long enough to get home and ignore Lance, but today was somehow different. Maybe it was some mix of emotion, and that Lance was currently driving to their favorite ice cream parlor, or maybe it was just that Asher was desperate for some human connection, but for whatever reason today he just broke. Tears began to slip down his cheeks as he looked down at the ground.

"I just- she was looking at me when she died- at *me* - she wanted- she *needed* me to help her and I- I didn't-" Asher choked out, his voice cracking and dying off near the end. It was a stark difference to his unfeeling, dry tone a moment ago as he was flooded with some of that fear, some of that *pain* that had been keeping him up at night, haunting him.

Lance was clearly a little surprised by this reaction, but he continued to speak in that soft, soothing tone.

“You *couldn’t* , Asher- because he was a full grown man- there was nothing you could’ve done… Remember what your therapist said? We aren’t blaming you for this- because it’s not your fault-” Lance said. Lance always said that. *“We aren’t blaming you for this.”* He’d say. *“We”* , so did Lance have to remind himself not to blame Asher, too?

“But you blame me, don’t you?? That’s why you can’t even look me in the eyes anymore! You think I could’ve done more- that I could’ve helped her!” Asher snapped, finally finding an outlet for all of his anger, his frustration at being so fucking *helpless* in every situation.

“No- No no, I- Asher that’s not true- I don’t blame you-” Lance stammered, his voice cracking.

“Then why do you always hesitate before you say that??” Asher demanded, tears flooding his eyes.

“I don’t- I don’t hesitate!” Lance shouted back, pulling over the car as tears clouded his vision.

“Yes you do! Now what, are you going to hit me too?? Come on- fucking do it, Lance! Everyone else does!” Asher shouted. He wanted to yell, to scream, to let out everything he was feeling through his voice.

That's what he was supposed to do, wasn't it? It's what his parents did, they yelled at each other, screamed until they were hoarse and couldn't talk the next morning.

“I’m not going to fucking hit you, Asher! God- damnit! Why do you always do this?? Every time I try to help you you turn things around and make me sound like *I’m* wrong for wanting to *help* you!” Lance shouted back, and in his eyes Asher could see that Lance was somehow surprised with himself, maybe for shouting back at Asher for the first time since all of this.

“I don’t need your help! I don’t need *anyone’s* help!! You’re just making things worse!”

“Oh wow, *I’m* making things worse?? I can’t even- fucking hell!” Lance suddenly jolted the car forwards and whipped around, changing course to bring them straight home. Asher just glared out the window as tears continued to stream down his cheeks. Even after that shouting match, he wished for nothing more than to hug Lance, to feel him softly pet his wings or stroke his hair. He wanted Lance to *comfort* him, not try to talk to him.

He wished for nothing more than to be a little kid again, following Lance around like a lost puppy.

He remained silent for the rest of the car ride home- when they got there Lance jumped out of the car and slammed his door shut, storming into the house. Asher shakily sighed and followed him inside, wishing the world would just swallow him up right then and there.

The hero facility

Chapter Summary

Asher goes to a funeral, tries to plan his own funeral, lots of fun stuff
Trigger warnings include but are not limited to: Suicide attempt, thoughts of suicide, blood/gore, anxiety attacks sort of, lots of mental health issues

Chapter Notes

This chapter is VERY long, potentially one of the longest we will have in this work, I got a little carried away so I'm sorry.
Also just to clarify a little, Calypso is gender-fluid and has no physical gender. Also after this chapter we are 1/4th of the way through what I officially have written or at least planned/drafted! Hoping to push out the rest of the totally finished chapters over the next week or so, then updates will slow down as I actually begin writing it again, not just posting old stuff

Things never really got better from that point- eventually his therapy sessions dropped down to just once a week, then every other week- not because he was actually starting to feel better, but because his dad was running out of money.

They had the funeral for her some time later- Asher got dressed into a decent suit his dad had rented, now that he was forced to stay sober sometimes. He still looked a mess, though- he rarely saw Lance or his dad anymore and things were worse now at school than they ever were before.

All of his extended family were at the funeral- a whole fruit salad of all the worst kinds of people on earth mixed with grief and a ton of alcohol. After having to listen to his aunt tell him how disrespectful and horrible he was for the third time, he managed to sneak some vodka into his juice.

He'd never had alcohol before, but he'd heard it described as a way adults escaped reality- and he sure could use an escape right now. It added a bitter taste- and he'd definitely put too much of it so he couldn't really taste the juice. He only had a few sips at first and was

thinking of just dumping the rest out, but before he could he started to feel a little funny.

It felt like everything was a bit fuzzy- he'd been pretty tuned out already but this was such a *different* feeling- so he kept drinking until his cup was empty, but resolved to stop himself there. The "after-party" was almost over anyways, and Lance would be driving him and their drunk dad home soon.

The next thing he knew, they were all in the car and he was staring out the window. Everything felt like it was just going so fast, and his head was spinning- but at least he still felt that fuzzy, almost floating feeling.

When they got home he helped their dad inside and dropped him down on the couch- Lance just instantly drove off again by himself. Asher sighed and went upstairs, going into the bathroom.

He was going to shower, but he just ended up staring at himself in the mirror for a long while. He looked unrecognizable- he couldn't even remember the last time he *really* looked into a mirror like this.

He hated it- he hated himself, and he hated that he didn't even *look* like himself at all.

He began to tremble the longer he stared, memories were flashing before his eyes. He heard his moms scream in the distance, he heard Dexter calling him useless or a waste, he heard Lance shouting at him- it was all *too much* .

He couldn't think- or maybe he was thinking too much, but he just couldn't fucking *deal* with it anymore. He stumbled out of the bathroom and into his messy, dark room. He felt like he was going to throw up as he reached under the bed and grabbed *the* knife- the knife his dad used. He wasn't even entirely sure how it ended up in his possession and not in a secure place right now, but he had it. It was cleaned of all the blood already, but when he looked at it in the dim lighting he could almost convince himself it was still covered in the thick red liquid and little bits of flesh and organs.

Tears streamed down his cheeks as he nearly tripped over himself to get back in the bathroom, quickly shutting the door and locking it tight behind himself.

He slumped down to the floor, clutching the knife in his shaking hands as his breathing began to pick up. He was *terrified* - scared of his

own actions.

He cried quietly as he watched himself from that odd third person perspective, but now he couldn't make it stop- he had always been able to stop it before, but now he just couldn't.

It felt like a weird muted panic as he saw himself rolling up his sleeves- he realized as he dug the sharp knife into his wrist that he was truly just a slave to his mind. He cried out as blood began to gush from the relatively deep wound, but he didn't stop there. He sliced into his arm again, then moved to the other one- cutting another deep crimson line into that flesh. It hurt- it *burned* , and he was scared- he didn't *want* this- he just wanted the pain to stop, he wanted his brain to stop- he wanted–

He wanted to die, that's why he was doing this. If he was dead, no one could hate him anymore- he could stop fighting if he died. Fighting just to get up in the morning, fighting not to just break whenever *anything* happened. He couldn't annoy anyone, or hurt anyone else if he was dead.

He was scared, but as he felt the blood pour out of himself and onto the floor, he felt an odd wave of calm wash over him.

It was like nothing mattered anymore, like in this moment no matter what he did, it didn't matter. His shoulders heaved as tears streamed down his cheeks, burning almost like the blade against his skin.

He knew dying must've hurt, but *holy shit* this was unreal. His arms were aching, but not only that, it felt like his *chest* was aching as well, like he'd just been stabbed in the heart, just like *she* had been.

Shaking, he dropped the knife onto the ground, but a second later he heard a heavy *thump* against the door. He jumped back in a sort of slow, lethargic way and turned to look at the door, now worried Lance had changed his mind and come home. Then he heard an odd sound- there was a soft *scratching* at the door- like a small animal was outside trying to get in.

That was the moment of clarity he needed, to look at himself and realize how fucking *crazy* he was. Why on earth would he try to do this, this thing that he'd previously *begged* Dexter not to do.

It was hard to picture Lance missing Asher the way he'd certainly miss Dexter though, and it's not like there was anyone else in Asher's life to miss him.

He hesitated a while- grabbing some bandages to wrap his arms up, moving as though he were in a trance. His limbs felt like jelly and every movement sent sharp spikes of pain up his arms- he was already starting to regret what he'd done, now looking at the blood everywhere and more still oozing out of the open wounds, staining the bandages he wrapped loosely around them. It hurt too much to wrap them tightly, and right now he just needed to get those ugly wounds out of sight so he could open the door.

The animal was still outside scratching until he'd finally unlocked the door and cracked it open just enough for whatever it was to come inside.

He gasped as he saw what the little creature was- it was a *dragon* . It was only a little less than a foot long not including the tail, and it was the same slightly purplish gray that his own wings and tail were. Now that he was growing up, they had changed a little though- there were now slightly darker patterns of mainly stripes on them. The little dragons were the same, the patterns were just much smaller and a tiny bit different- but it even had the same tail as Asher.

"What the hell…" Asher whispered, reaching out a hand for the little dragon to sniff. It made this quiet chittering sound and stood on its back legs, grasping onto Asher's hand. It had a build almost like a chinese dragon, with a long and slim body- but it was covered in fur instead and it obviously had wings. Its eyes were a pale blue, and when he leaned down to look closer it was almost like there were dozens of tiny stars in its eyes, twinkling softly.

He knew then what this must be- this was *his* dragon- it was coming here because this was the lowest point in Asher's life, the very moment that he needed it. He carefully scooped up the little thing, which purred and nuzzled into his arm. He winced a little but didn't drop the dragon- he just used his other arm to reach up and grab his phone off of the counter.

He'd saved Melindas number, and without even thinking of how late it was, he called her.

She picked up only a moment later.

"Hello?" She somehow sounded wide awake still.

"Hey- this is um- this is Asher-" He mumbled. God, he sounded so pathetic right now- his voice was still shaking and he sounded so *weak* .

“Oh, is everything okay, dear?” She asked, worry slipping into her tone.

“Well I- I just got back from my- my moms funeral- and- it- my dragon is here- the- it looks exactly like me-” Asher tried to explain.

“Oh my- it’s so early for that to happen. Are you alright? Have you been attending therapy still?” She pressed, sounding concerned.

“Yeah I’m- tonight was just really hard but- what do I do now?” He asked softly.

“Well- now you need to name it- I would assume it’s a male because you are, but really there’s no way to tell- so it doesn’t matter what gender you refer to it as. It will need to drink and eat, obviously- I- how big is it? If it’s a very large dragon, I can get you set up with some officials- bigger animals that need to eat a lot get government assistance to take care of costs for food-” Melinda said.

“Oh- he’s uh- tiny- he fits in the palm of my hand- I don’t think that will be an issue-” Asher mumbled. He really was having a hard time focusing, his head was fuzzy and everything was sounding a little muffled.

“Alright, that’s probably for the better- you’ll need to test around with what it will and won’t eat, though- I would assume that he’ll like meat but there’s just not a lot of information, unfortunately- I would assume he knows what’s toxic to him, however-” Melinda explained.

“Okay- thank you, Melinda- I’m uh- gonna go to bed now- bye-” Asher said softly.

“Okay, goodnight, dear-” She replied right before he hung up the phone.

He looked down at the little dragon, who looked back up at him with those pretty little eyes. He wasn’t really sure what gender the dragon was just by looking at it, so he decided he’d figure it out later. Right now, he needed to come up with her name- and for some reason, one sticks out strong in his mind.

“... Calypso..?” He asked softly, and the dragon tilted his head like he’d already heard and known the name. Asher smiled a little and gently petted the dragon's long, soft body.

“I’m sorry for the shit show you’re about to come into, Calypso… but

I'm glad you're here now- I'm so tired of being alone…" Asher whispered. The dragon nuzzled against his chest, still purring softly.

"I gotta clean all this blood up…" Asher mumbled and shakily stood up, moving to set Calypso on the counter next to the sink.

"Stay right here, okay?" He still felt very woozy and out of it from the blood loss, but he could finally *feel* again, even if all he felt was regret and anxiety.

It was like he was in a constant Limbo of either not feeling, or feeling far too much. The next morning, somehow or another his dad had figured out what Asher tried to do. *"If you want to die so bad then just fucking do it."* The man had said- that would echo around in his mind for years to come, he was sure of it. He didn't tell anyone about Calypso- he was going to tell Lance, but he chickened out when his big brother had come home in a bad mood.

It was only maybe a week later when his dad kicked Lance out- Asher begged and pleaded for Lance to stay, but he left anyway. Asher texted him daily after that, but he rarely ever got a response- so eventually he just stopped. Dexter stopped reaching out after a while too, but at least that meant he wasn't being manipulated by him anymore.

The last Asher had heard, they'd both moved together to a nearby big city. That was over a year ago now, and Asher was about fifteen and a half at this point, and Calypso showed no signs of leaving. They'd grown a little closer- Asher brought him everywhere and still didn't tell anyone about her. The dragon still didn't really have a gender- he just thought of her as both, usually.

He'd fallen into a vicious cycle of self harm, he'd lost a lot of weight, and he essentially went mute at school and at home.

One night, his dad brought home some woman to sleep with. He'd been doing that more lately- it disgusted Asher, quite frankly, and tonight he'd had enough. He had been thinking about running away for a long time, but he honestly didn't really know where he would even go.

That didn't matter now- it's not like anyone would look for him. He packed up his bag, set Calypso on his shoulder and slipped out of the house at around eight p.m that night. He just started walking out of

his neighborhood, when suddenly he got a call on his phone. It startled him a little, but he was quick to pick it up- he saw the contact was Melinda just as he answered.

“Hello?” He asked quietly.

“Hello, Asher- is everything okay? I got this feeling like something was wrong-” She spoke softly.

“... Yeah, I’m uh- leaving home-” He mumbled. He wasn’t sure why he told her that, but he just felt like he should.
“Oh my- where are you going?” She asked with worry.

“I’m not- really sure yet-” He sighed.

“... Okay, listen- there’s something I would really like to talk to you about, dear- if I send you my address can you make it here?”

“I- I mean I guess, if a bus goes close enough to there-” Asher muttered.

“Yes, there’s one near my neighborhood- just be safe, okay?” She said and hung up. He headed to a bus stop and then checked the address, looking at the map he was able to figure out where exactly he needed to go.

Once he figured it out, he got on the bus and flopped himself down in an empty row. The only other people on the bus were drunk, high, or the unfortunate souls who were either leaving or going to work at this shitty time. He slumped against the window, clutching his backpack to his chest as he just zoned out on the flashing lights of the car.

It was getting harder to really *feel* much of anything lately- it was so much easier to just “shut off” his feelings, even if sometimes it scared him to do so.

He eventually ended up dozing off, but he’d jerk awake with every little bump in the road or whenever the bus stopped, and luckily no one chose to sit near him.

Hours later, it was just about sunrise when he stumbled off the bus and out to the bus stop. He considered laying down on the bench to sleep for a little, but decided against it and just began walking the rest of the way to Melinda’s house. He hoped she’d have some tea for him- or a place to sleep, either one.

As he looked around he realized how odd this whole thing was. He was *in* the city- all the buildings on the outskirts here were small and shitty, but he was still definitely in it- the buildings were all at least a few stories high- but Melinda hadn't given him an apartment complex or number to go to.

Soon he realized why- Melinda lived in the only house left here. She must've refused to sell when the apartments and work offices went up- she lived in a cute little two story house with a white picket fence, bushes and trees all inside of it. Her property was right between two buildings, like something out of some odd movie.

He sighed and pushed open the gate on the fence, heading up to the front door and softly knocking a few times. He heard movement inside, and a moment later she came and opened up the door.

"Oh goodness, you look horrible- please come in, my dear-!" She said quickly and ushered him inside. It was all a blur as she settled him on the couch with blankets and a warm mug of tea, telling him to make himself at home as she sat next to him. Calypso was still curled up safely out of sight in his jacket, but the little dragon was listening to everything.

"Alright, are you ready for me to tell you something? It's going to be quite a shock, my dear-" She asked softly.
"Mhm- 'm fine-" Asher mumbled without even really thinking. Of course he was *fine* , he had to be.

"Okay. Well, as you know, you and your brother are quite special- there are others with very unique species like you out there, and all of you tend to have quite powerful abilities you don't always know about right away. Me and a good friend of mine try to gather up those with such unique abilities who seem interested in our program, and he helps train those people up. Think of things like- superheroes, but more undercover? No one's going to know who you are really, but it's like a much more powerful police or detective unit. It's dangerous, and you're so young I just- never offered it to you. But- I need to tell you that Lance is in fact part of this program- it's why he moved here, actually. And if you are not planning on going home, we would be able to provide you food and housing in exchange for you attending sessions with my friend-" Melinda explained softly. Asher's head was reeling, he just stared at her as he felt like the ground beneath him was unsteady and cracking.

"I-... does- does Dexter know…?" He asked weakly- he wasn't sure

why *that* was the first thing he thought to ask, but oh well.

It was just such an odd thing, to go from sitting all solemnly on a bus and worrying where he was going to go, to then suddenly being told fucking a *superhero* would be a job opportunity for him.

“I don’t know, my dear- that’s a question for Lance. Speaking of- does he know you’ve run away?” She countered.

“No- he doesn’t know anything about me anymore.” He muttered bitterly.

“I’m sorry to hear that, Asher… you two were so close when you were younger-” She gently set a hand on his shoulder.

“Yeah, well. Things change. I’m not a little kid anymore.” He snapped back, and she sighed.

“Alright, then do you want me to call my friend to come visit? Are you interested in this program?” She asked. Asher thought for a moment, but at this point he really had nothing to lose.

“Yes, I’m interested-” He responded firmly.

“Very good then- I’ll call him in the morning, for now you need sleep-” She said softly.

Asher ended up passing out on the couch, and by the time he woke up it was late morning. It smelled like pancakes in the kitchen- for a second he allowed himself to be pulled back to childhood, when his mom was alive, when he was *happy* .

It didn’t last long, though. It never did.

He soon got up and joined Melinda in the kitchen.

“Good morning.” He mumbled.

“Good morning, dear! I called my friend, his name is Daniel- he’s going to be here in about an hour, so go ahead into the bathroom and get cleaned up while I finish breakfast, okay?” She said with a smile. He just nodded and walked numbly to the bathroom.

He showered and changed, then ate breakfast and helped Melinda clean up as they waited for Daniel to arrive. He’d be lying if he said he wasn’t nervous, but lately his anxiety was just turning into frustration.

He jumped a little as he was snapped out of his thoughts by a knock on the door. Melinda hummed as she went to open it.
“Welcome back, Daniel!” She said with a smile as she invited the man inside. He was *really* tall- and very buff too- if Asher cared enough he might be scared. He had light brown hair, almost like Ashers- and these deep forest green eyes. He had a pair of these odd fluffy looking black ears, as well as a long leopard tail- but strangely, he also had a pair of light gray wings that matched the leopard limbs, with black spots and white undersides. Everything about him was strange.

“Thank you, Melinda- is this him?” Daniel asked with a smile, gesturing to Asher.

“Yes, please get to know him- I’ll make us some tea-” She smiled and headed back to the kitchen. Asher began to think she used tea as an excuse or escape quite often.

He crossed his arms as he watched Daniel come and sit on a seat across from him.

“Nice to meet you properly, Asher-” He said with a comforting smile. Something about it just made Asher feel oddly *comfortable* .

“Hello.” He muttered back.

“So, I hear you’re interested in joining my program. But I want you to know *everything* you possibly can before you do, okay? Are you ready for me to talk a lot?” He asked, and Asher just looked a little confused before nodding. Most people didn’t care about giving him much information, as long as he consented to whatever was happening. And sometimes they didn't even care that much.

“Alright. Well, as I’m sure Mel has mentioned, it is quite dangerous. Usually new recruits go through about two or three years of training before I allow them out onto the field. This training will be mainly with me, where I give you instruction on what exactly to do with your special abilities. This varies a lot depending on the person and ability, but you will also receive schooling in coding, wilderness survival, basic weapon training, as well as schooling normal for anyone your age that you would receive in highschool and up. I’m not going to lie, it’s a lot to adjust to- and we do have a smaller group. Right now it’s only me, your brother, and six others- for most of us, each other are the only family we’ve got. We deal with a lot of highly sensitive information as well- it’s not going to be easy, but you’ll have a safe place to stay, food, clothes, other necessities, and access to talk to me

or Mel at any time for any emotional needs. Do you happen to know what your ability is yet?" He asked after his lengthy explanation.

"... No- I- didn't know I was supposed to have one." He mumbled.

"Okay, that's okay- I had one other previous student I took on at fourteen as well- she took some time to learn her ability. There are things we can do to discover it faster, but for the time being we can get you trained in everything else. Melinda mentioned that you had your spirit guide with you, yes?" Daniel asked, but Asher was instantly confused.

"My… what?"

"Ah, your dragon- we call them spirit guides-" Daniel chuckled awkwardly.

"... Oh- right- um, yeah I've got him here- why?" Asher asked.

"Oh, just because none of my other students have theirs yet. It might be a little jarring having one around- where is he?" Daniel asked, and after a moment Asher moved his jacket to let Calypso scurry out. She curled up on Asher's shoulder and watched Daniel for a moment. Daniel reached out to him and let Calypso sniff his hand- she seemed to trust him quite a bit and quickly crawled up his arm and onto his shoulder. Daniel smiled and gently petted her on the head.

"He's so friendly- I'm sure that no one will have any issues with him being around. Do you feel comfortable telling me exactly when and why he came around?" The man asked softly.

"... Not- particularly. It was about two years ago, though- I haven't- told anyone but Melinda. But I- I don't care if everyone else there knows." Asher muttered.

"Okay- it's good for you to bring him everywhere with you, alright?" Daniel said, and Asher nodded in response.

Things moved quickly after that- too quickly, and the next thing Asher knew he was in Daniel's car driving to the building they mainly worked in, closer to the middle of the city. Daniel was sort of just giving him a debrief on the general mood in the place and how things worked out- luckily Asher could get his own room, just in the same hallway as the other people there. When they pulled up, Daniel parked in a somewhat small parking lot behind a decent sized building- it just looked like an apartment building, but incredibly *tall* .

He felt like he'd be able to touch the clouds from the top story of it.

Daniel led him inside, showing him a keycard system so that no one could just come in through any of the doors without authorization. The first floor looked like a normal lobby of sorts, but they headed into an elevator. They needed a code to use it, and Daniel told him that the code was *"8928"* . He'd have to try to remember that- or take loads of stairs.

"The living quarters are on the second to top floor, so don't look out the windows if you have issues with heights-" Daniel warned.

"I'll be fine." Asher mumbled.

"Alright- also, it's unlikely that most of the others will be home right now- they all have jobs or friends they typically attend to during the day. It gives you time to settle in, though- and then for dinner everyone can come and introduce themselves. It's been over a year since we've had a new recruit-" Daniel explained.

"... Okay. Lance doesn't know I'm coming, does he?" Asher asked.

"No, he doesn't- everyone knows that *someone* is joining us, but no one knows anything about you yet-" Daniel answered.

"Good."

When the elevator finally came to a stop towards the top of the building, the doors opened in what looked like a living room. It was very nice and spacious, and there was a half wall bar thing separating the living room from the kitchen. There was a large window along the farthest wall- only a few other buildings reached this tall so there was a very clear view of the sky and horizon. The living room itself had one large couch and a few other littler love-seats and single chairs, all relatively facing the big TV on the wall to the right. There were a few plants scattered around the space, giving the whole place a much more homey and comfortable vibe. It didn't just feel like a building, it felt like someone's *home* , and he felt oddly uneasy just stepping into someone else's home like this.

"As you can see, here's the living room and kitchen- you're welcome to use anything in this space at any time, but if it's after ten p.m you just have to keep the volume to a minimum. The rooms are relatively soundproof, but they don't block everything. Here, I'll show you to your room in the hallway- we keep everyone's names on the doors to their room for convenience-" Daniel said as he led Asher to the left,

where there was a particularly long hallway with doors on either side. The doors were in a pattern that he could only think to describe as a zig-zag, where they weren't directly across from each other in the hall. The hallway had ten doors total in it, and he skimmed over the names for each one. There were two empty rooms at the very end of the hall, and Daniel gave Asher the one right next to Lance's room.

"Here you go, you can have this room- I'll get your name put up on it before everyone gets home tonight. To get to the bathrooms, just leave this hallway and go across the living room to the other side, there's four bathrooms over there in that hallway. There are five floors below this one that are essentially the exact same as this- as I'm sure you can tell we were expecting a much bigger group than this, but I'm happy with what we've got right now. If you should choose to go to any of the other floors, just clean up after yourself when you're done, please." Daniel hummed as he pushed open the door to Asher's new room.

Looking around, it was a little plain- but it was so much bigger and nicer than his old room. It had a nice big full size bed, a fancy wood headboard, a desk, a nightstand, a dresser, and a bookshelf all in the same color and pattern as the headboard so they all matched. There was also a pretty big closet in the room- it looked like it was taking a chunk of Lance's room, so Asher assumed the other half of the wall on that side must be the back wall of Lance's closet to make them fit like a basic puzzle piece. There was one window in the middle of the back wall in his room- it seemed to be a decent size, but it was hard to tell because at the moment it was covered up by light gray curtains.

He didn't know much about buildings or architecture, but the whole place seemed to be done pretty well and gave as much room as possible.

"Okay- but- what's on the very top story?" Asher asked.

"Ah, that's my room and office up there. Come along, I'll show you-" Daniel replied and headed back out of the hallway. Asher followed along as they went back to the elevator, then up to the tallest floor in the building. Daniel stepped out into a relatively dark space, then flicked on a light. The initial room was a decent size- maybe the size of one of the bedrooms, and all it had were basic office things like a desk in the middle of the room, a few bookshelves, and some more plants. There were three doors in the room, one on each wall other than the elevator, and all three were closed. Daniel headed to the one on the right.

“This is my bedroom, if you should need anything and you aren’t sure where I am or if I’m asleep, you can come knock at any time. If I do not answer, it means I’m not in a room- no one is permitted to be in there if I am not also there, alright?” Daniel said firmly.

“... Okay-” Asher mumbled suspiciously.

Daniel watched him for a second before going over to the second door- the one in the middle.

“This is just a bathroom, so any students training with me don’t need to go back downstairs-” He said as he passed by it, quickly going to the third door. He opened it and stepped inside- it was by far the biggest room, which sort of looked like an odd yoga or gymnastics studio with some basic equipment and large blue mats lying around- the windows in this room were huge, so it was quite bright even with the lights off.

“This is the training room. When you’re ready to learn things, we will come here to practice basic hand-to-hand combat, and figuring out whatever your ability is. The quickest way to discover it, unfortunately, is usually through distress-” Daniel started, and instantly Asher went pale. Shit, he knew there would be a catch- he was going to be tortured here for sure. His palms began sweating as he gauged if he could get into the bathroom and lock it before Daniel could catch him, but before he could even move the man began speaking again.

“That’s why it can take a while to figure out, because all of my students are quite happy here- we usually try other methods. I can tell you’ve got a lot of anger, so for you I think the best option might be for you to have a punching bag and try to *make* yourself angry at it- it sounds dumb, but it's therapeutic, amazing exercise, and a great channel for pent up emotions. Is that something you’d want to try?” Daniel asked.

“... Um- s-sure I- I guess-” Asher mumbled.

“Excellent- I’ll get that arranged for you soon. For now, let's get you back downstairs- I’ll help you find some clothes to order online that are easy to move in, breathable, comfortable for you, and in a style you like, okay? Then I’ll leave you be until everyone else gets here-” Daniel said with a smile and moved back to the elevator. Asher just followed silently.

Daniel was so nice to him, after over an hour of talking about clothes

he preferred and picking out some nice outfits, it was hard not to trust the man a little more. He was so genuine with his words and so careful with his movements- he hadn't done anything to really startle Asher other than that one comment earlier. Honestly, it was just nice to be talked to like he was a fucking *person* again and not just an object to push around as you pleased.

Once Asher was left alone in his room, he flopped back onto the bed and stared up at the ceiling. Maybe things wouldn't be so bad here after all. He still wasn't sold on the idea of having some great life, but for a few years he could probably keep himself alive here, then when he was ready to go all he'd have to do is "accidentally" do something stupid on the field and die.

That was nice- he wouldn't have to kill himself, he could seem like he died a hero instead.

He was hit with a pang of anxiety thinking about Lance, though. He hadn't even gotten a text or call from him in over a month, and before that it wasn't like they really talked often. Lance was probably such a different person now- he honestly hoped that he was doing better, but at the same time he hoped Lance was doing shitty so he'd understand how Asher felt.

He jolted up as he heard a knock on the door.

"... Yeah?" He said hesitantly. Daniel pushed open the door and quickly shut it behind himself as he slipped into the room.

"Hey, kid- Lance just got home. I wanted to ask you if you want me to tell him now that you're here, or wait until tonight for dinner?" Daniel asked, and Asher hesitated a moment. At least if they waited until dinner, Lance couldn't freak out too much or ask too many unnecessary questions.

"Let's wait, please-" He mumbled.

"Alright- I'll come get you when I'm about done with dinner, then-" Daniel replied, then slipped back out of the room.

A nuisance

Chapter Summary

> Asher and Lance argue, Asher and Daniel have an important conversation, this a bit of a more tame chapter with some angst but a little fluff and comfort as well

Asher waited anxiously after that until Daniel came back to tell him that dinner was ready. He felt himself beginning to disconnect from reality as he followed Daniel to the dining room, which he hadn't seen from the previous angle but it was a little three walled room off of the living room. Everything sounded so far away, or like it was all muffled underwater- but instead of detaching from all feeling at that point, he started to get even more anxious in a vicious spiral. He hated it- he wanted to curl up somewhere and cry, but it was too late for that now. Asher sat down at the already set table, with food and eight empty plates laid out over it. The table was big, and there were a few extra seats with no plate in front of them. All the food was in the center of the table- it was a bunch of chicken, salad, and some roasted vegetables in some nice fancy dishes.

His breath caught in his throat as Daniel called out.

"Dinnertime, everyone!" He heard all the doors in the hallway being opened- he was unable to see down the hallway because of his position at the table, but he heard several sets of footsteps as a few people chattered away happily.

A total of six other people entered the room and went to sit down- Lance was one of the last few, and he froze as his eyes locked onto Asher. Asher just watched him with a dull expression- but without even saying a word to Asher, Lance just turned to Daniel as his expression grew cold and firm.

"Why the *hell* did you bring him here??" Lance snapped, effectively silencing everyone else in the room. Daniel looked as calm as ever, though.

"He didn't have anywhere else to go- he chose to come here, Lance. Just like you did-" Daniel said softly.

“No! No, not ‘like I did’! I was a grown ass adult, he’s fucking thirteen!” Lance shouted. Asher wasn’t sure why, but he was *pissed* about Lance shouting at Daniel. He abruptly stood up and slammed his hands down on the table.

“I’m fourteen! Almost fifteen, you’d know that if you bothered to call every so often!” Asher shouted back- he certainly didn’t have this much of a temper when Lance had last seen him, and this clearly caught the man off guard.
“He has a right to be here- I understand your concerns, but I refuse to cast him out to the streets-” Daniel spoke calmly, trying to fix the situation.

“He doesn’t need to go to the streets, *Daniel* . He has a dad.” Lance hissed.

“How can you say that?? After all the things he did-!? Don’t you even bother worrying about me, I’m not here for you anyways. I’m here because *I* want to be, and I don’t plan on associating myself with you.” Asher snapped as he sat back down, crossing his arms with a huff. Lance turned to him- a look that could’ve almost seemed like sadness crossed his face before shifting to frustration.

“You’re a *child* , Asher. You have no clue what you’re getting yourself into here.” Lance said firmly.

“I’m not a moron. I know what I’m doing, and I don’t want to talk to you anymore. Sit down and leave me the hell alone.” Asher muttered. Lance looked absolutely furious now, but he just sat down and glared at the table. A woman said something softly to him- when he looked at her, he was startled at first by how she looked. She looked just like a younger version of his mom- black hair, green eyes and all.

She also had a pair of wings- but hers were white and had this odd almost sparkle to them. She had a matching pair of horse ears, and he could bet she had a horse tail as well.

“I don’t want another outburst from either one of you two like that again, okay?” Daniel said gently, but sternly. Asher just nodded idly, happy to feel himself drifting away as he floated into that peace of dissociation.

“Now, I’d like everyone to go around and introduce themselves, just say your name, what species you are, and what your ability is.” Daniel said with a smile. A young, eager looking woman spoke up first. She had fiery red hair that went down to her waist, her amber eyes almost

seemed to glow. She had a large pair of almost dragon-like horns, and he'd seen before that she had a long scaly tail- but she wasn't any regular dragon, he knew that.

"Alright, my name is Lucinda, I'm a hydra- sort of- and I can control electrical pulses-" She said with a bright smile. Asher almost wanted to ask about it, but his mind was so far gone at the moment that he just couldn't find the words.

"I'm Chardy, I'm a sheep- doesn't seem too special, but I can look through the future and the past to an extent." A somewhat younger guy said- he had black hair, black sheep ears, deep blue eyes and a pair of curly brown horns.

"I am Victor, I'm a hippogriff, and I can teleport myself, various objects, and other people around." A guy around Lucinda's age said, sounding quite proud of himself. He had short brown hair in a military cut, odd feathery looking ears, a lion tail, and a pair of brown eagle wings. He wondered how many of these people could fly- many people had wings, but not everyone with them could fly due to the size and bone density. Asher could fly- he didn't tell anyone, but he could do it- he was so lightweight and his bones were frail enough to allow him to fly somewhat easily.

"And my name is Francis, I am quite an odd hybrid with no specific name- but I can manipulate and create my own ice and snow." Seemingly the oldest of the group said. He was tall but thin, with a pair of white wings with black spots all over them- he also had typical deer antlers atop his head. He had white hair and very pale blue eyes- he almost looked albino with how pale his skin was as well.

"He's very proud of his snowmen, you'll learn quickly-" The last woman said with a smirk before continuing her introduction.

"I'm Amelia, I'm a pegasus, and I have essentially just increased senses and natural abilities. I can run a little faster, jump a little higher, so on and so forth-" She added with a hum. Asher just nodded a little, trying to commit at least their names and abilities to memory.

"Shut up, Amelia." Francis muttered.

Dinner was quiet after that, with some chatting between the others. Afterwards Daniel got up to do the dishes- Asher quietly slipped into the kitchen with him and just leaned against the counter, watching him with his wings tucked in close to his body and his tail curled partially around his leg.

“I know it’s a lot to adjust to, Asher- I can’t imagine what you’re going through right now- but I really do think this will be good for you. You can make some friends who have been through similar things to you- I think you’ll get along with Chardy particularly well.” Daniel said softly, not even looking up from what he was doing as he spoke.

“Yeah, right. No one actually likes me or gets along with me, it’s just easier for them to pretend to.” Asher muttered, glancing at the dining room where he could just see Lance finally starting to relax. He watched as his big brother began chatting with the others- something about his smile just shattered something deep inside Asher. He felt tears well in his eyes as he watched them- he hated this feeling, this helpless, broken, depressing feeling. And he didn’t even understand why he was feeling it- Lance was *happy* , he should be glad. Maybe it's because Asher is realizing that Lance can be happy without him- in fact, Lance is probably better off without him.

“Well that’s just not true, because I like you. You’re a good kid-” Daniels voice cut through his thoughts, startling him a little as he just froze up.

“... You can’t like me, you don’t even know me.” He muttered as he pushed away from the counter and headed to the hallway of bedrooms. Daniel didn’t say anything else, but Asher could tell he was watching him go.

That night was a rough one- he tossed and turned for *hours* . The next day, he was pretty much left alone by everyone. Daniel tried to call him out for breakfast and lunch, but he insisted he wasn’t hungry and kept his door locked just in case. In the evening, he heard a gentle knock on the door.

“I’m still not hungry, Daniel- I might be getting sick, best not to come in-” He mumbled.

“... I’m not Daniel. Can I please come in?” Lance mumbled from the other side of the door- his tone sounded absolutely broken, and for some reason Asher just jumped up to open the door without even a thought. He looked up at Lance, who looked tired as he watched Asher for a moment before hugging him tightly. Asher stiffened at first, but he didn’t pull away like he initially wanted to. He slowly hugged Lance back, but he was stiff- it wasn’t like when he was a kid and would just melt into Lance.

How could it be the same, after all that had changed?

“I’m sorry for shouting before, Asher- I just-... I just don’t think this is the best place for you- it’s not safe, and you’re worrying me- you look like you haven’t eaten a good meal in weeks- has father not been feeding you or something..?” He asked softly. Asher shrugged a little, not entirely sure what to say.

“I’m fine, Lance- I don’t- I don’t need anyone to look out for me anymore…” Asher muttered.

“I should’ve never left you… I- please, before you learn too much- come stay with me- I have an apartment and- it’s not a lot of room but-” Lance started, but Asher cut him off.

“Wait- what-? You don’t live here?” Asher asked, pulling away from the hug.

“Well I- no- I have a room, sometimes I stay the night- but me and Dexter have an apartment- he’s changed a lot, he’s honestly a really great guy- I know he's done quite a few bad things, but he’s gone to therapy and done a lot to change-” Lance explained quickly. Asher's expression grew cold as he took a step back away from Lance.

“You don’t know anything about what he did, if you really think that.” He mumbled.

“... What do you mean?” Lance asked, now worried. Asher hesitated, growing nervous- but just then he heard Daniel call them for dinner. Without saying anything, he brushed past Lance and headed quickly down the hallway.

He carried on like that for a while, denying food most of the time and just avoiding Lance who kept trying to talk to him whenever he got the chance, but they never got to talk about anything important.

After a few days, he was more settled in- he began talking to Chardy some, and Daniel was right- he and Chardy did get along quite well. Asher was sure he was faking it- he was sure Daniel was too- but deep down, he was starting to form a connection with them over the next few weeks. He even started tolerating smalltalk with everyone else, including Lance- he could feel his walls lowering with each day, and it was *terrifying* .

One day, he and Daniel were upstairs in the training area.

They still had no clue what Asher's ability might be, but they had been testing things to try and find out.

"Alright, I have an idea- I don't know if you'll like it or want to do it, but I'm going to offer it to you-" Daniel said calmly as he sat down on the bench in the room, Asher sitting next to him.

"Okay- what is it?"

"I want you to talk to me about painful memories- not anything you really don't want to relive, but I think this could be helpful- talking about it could be emotional enough to spark something, and if nothing else then it's a nice therapy session. Some studies allude to the idea that talking over trauma with someone you trust in a safe, comfortable place can help heal the PTSD from it. Do you trust me enough to do that, and do you feel safe here?" Daniel asked softly, and Asher hesitated for a long moment. His hands shook- he knew what the right answer was, the one that would make Daniel the happiest- but looking into that soft green gaze he just couldn't bring himself to lie.

"... I- I don't know- you're really nice but I-" Asher trailed off, his voice fading to a soft exhale as he tried to find the right words to say.

"Hey, it's okay- the fact that you're willing to admit that lets me know what I need to. You know I'm not going to get angry or hurt you for your response, and if you're not ready to open up yet, then don't-" Daniel spoke gently, and Asher nodded a little.

"Okay… but I- I want to try- can we do it in another room, though? We did battle training here last week and I think subconsciously I'll be listening for someone coming at me like you were having us practice-" Asher mumbled, and Daniel smiled a bit.

"Of course- do you want to go to my room? There's some cozy chairs in there and a ton of plants- I only hesitate to allow people in there when I don't know them, and because my spirit guide is there sometimes-" Daniel said as he stood up. Asher stood as well and watched him with wide eyes.

"You have yours with you too?" He asked. No one but Daniel and Melinda knew about Calypso still- the little dragon usually stayed hidden and tucked away in Asher's room, but sometimes she'd hide in his clothes if he was wearing enough layers- like right now.

“Mhm, I do- I needed her once about eight years ago when I first started this place- and when my partner died- I’m in a better place now, but she still chooses to stay around with me sometimes. I don’t know where she goes when she’s not here, but she always is when things are going poorly- sometimes she’s here randomly, though-” Daniel explained as he led Asher out of the room and across the office outside.

“Oh- okay-” Asher mumbled as they headed into the room. It was pretty dim inside, but he could make out vague shapes of dozens of plants as Daniel had told him. He stiffened a little when he heard movement inside the room, but Daniel seemed relaxed as he strolled inside and turned on another light. It was still relatively dim, but he could see everything now- including a massive winged leopard sprawled across the couch.
The beast rolled onto her side and lazily gazed over at Asher, she had pale green eyes that somehow made her look incredibly wise.

“Oh, hello Hilda-” Daniel said softly as he went to pet her giant head.

“You can come say hello, Asher- I promise she won’t hurt you. We have a close enough bond that she knows how I feel about people when they’re around-” He added. Asher tucked his wings close to himself and hesitantly walked over to the both of them. He slowly reached out to somewhat awkwardly pat Hilda's head- she purred loudly as she sniffed his hand.

Calypso wiggled out of where he’d been hidden in Asher’s pocket- making this little squeak sound as he full on jumped down onto Hilda. The big cat jolted up, but paused to sniff Calypso before laying back down. Asher grabbed Calypso, who started squirming to get away from him.

“Shit- I’m sorry-” Asher muttered as he tried to stuff the dragon back into his pocket.

“Oh no, it’s okay Asher- you should leave him out-” Daniel said softly.

“He’s a fuckin nuisance- I should’ve left him in my room.” Asher said bitterly.

“Come on now- he’s your embodiment, he is a buildup of everything you *feel* inside-” Daniel replied.

That’s the problem. Asher thought.

“If only he could be the embodiment of everything I *think* instead. That would be much better.” Asher retorted, finally letting go of the still struggling Calypso, who went and found a spot on Hilda to curl up in her fur. Daniel went and sat on another couch, gesturing for Asher to sit next to him- which he quickly did.

“Unfortunately it doesn’t work that way- try not to get frustrated, though. Let’s focus on something else- what do you want to talk about?” Daniel asked.

“I don’t know-” Asher mumbled with a shrug.

“Alright, well- what’s something bad that happened to you that you think shaped part of who you are today?” He asked, and Asher had to pause and think for a while. He could just jump right into his moms death, or that time he’d seriously tried to kill himself, or any of the times he’d taken pills or not eaten until he started passing out- but all of that was a little too heavy at the moment.

“... Well- one time me and my parents were home- Lance had been over at a friend's house, maybe Dexter’s- I don’t remember. But mom was high as a kite and my father got angry at me for something- he started hitting me like he usually did a lot. But that time Lance came home, and he burned him real bad with his wings- I hate thinking about that night, but it was also the first time I felt protected like that-” Asher mumbled as Daniel looked at him with a soft expression.

“I see… Lance has talked to me a little about your family, but he always preferred to talk to Melinda about it, really-” The man said gently. Asher nodded and hesitated a second before asking a very quiet question.

“... What- what did Lance say about me…?”

“Oh Asher I don’t-... I don’t know if I should go into detail about it- besides, he didn’t tell me much, just little comments- you wouldn’t be getting the full story-” Daniel replied.

“Please…? I just- I need to know-...” Asher pleaded, and Daniel sighed.

“Okay-... he- he used to say things like he was annoyed with you, but I know he still cares about you- he’s still pissed at me for bringing you here and putting you in danger. He wouldn’t be if he didn’t love you- and I know he’s feeling guilty for not reaching out, and especially for leaving you with your father- so really, beneath all of his surface level

displeasure, I think if you just really tried talking to him it would do you both some good-" He knew Daniel was trying to sugarcoat what Lance said, and now his thoughts were spiraling as he wondered what horrible things Lance could've said about him.

Tears welled in his eyes and he wrapped his arms and wings around himself as he looked at the ground. Calypso suddenly looked up from where she was with Hilda and scurried over, curling up in Asher's lap. Asher was just as much of a nuisance to Lance as Calypso could be to Asher.

Daniel set a gentle hand on his shoulder, clearly trying to be comforting.

"Let's talk about something else, okay..? Tell me about your father-" Daniel urged softly.

"He-... he was so angry all the time- he always drinks, and- and lately he's been bringing lots of women over. They must be hired because- I would never think anyone would willingly be with him, how he is now. He's a *murderer* - and he feels guilty for it, but he should. I hope he lives with the regret of what he did, weighing his soul down for the rest of his life- I hope it travels with him into the next life, he doesn't deserve peace." Asher's voice gradually became an angry and harsh whisper- these were words he'd never dare speak before, he didn't even really know he felt that way.

"Asher, did you know… in the trial- he was deemed not guilty…?" Daniel said gently.

" *What??* " Asher demanded.

"There- wasn't enough evidence-" Daniel added.

"Not enough- I could show you the exact knife he used to kill her! I still fucking have the damn thing-! I could- goddamnit, that fucker should be rotting in jail right now!" Asher shouted. He stiffened as he felt Daniel wrap his arms around him and gently squeeze him.

"I know… I know he does, and maybe someday there's something we can do about that… but right now it's about *you* , okay..?" Daniel whispered, wrapping his wings around Asher. A single tear slipped down his cheek as he curled up in Daniel's arms- he couldn't remember the last time someone had comforted him with physical contact, but damn did he miss it.

“O-okay…” He whimpered.

“Very good… tell me about some good memories now, okay..? What’s something with your mom that you enjoyed doing…?” Daniel asked.

“We… we used to watch TV sometimes- I think she was usually high, but it… it felt nice to do things with her. Sometimes she would bring me shopping- my favorite times with her were when she was sober… we didn’t get to spend a lot of time together after Lance moved in, though- she invested a lot into him… it’s fine, though- I love both of them and Lance needed her more than me. She always said he was having a harder time, and that I didn’t need her as much because I was so *good* - because I *know better* - I’m not good anymore, though… I hate that she’s gone but-... ‘m glad I don’t have to live with her disappointment. She’d hate me if she could see me now-... but she never will… because she’s *dead* … because I wasn’t strong enough- I wasn’t *good enough* … and I never will be…” He began trembling near the end. Everything in him *ached* - like he was being physically stabbed through the chest. He clung onto Daniel as he desperately tried to repress his sobs. He should've just kept his damn mouth shut, now he was being a bother to Daniel and telling him far too much.

“You *are* a good kid, Asher… you’re not a bad person or weak because you *couldn’t* save her… your father is a full grown man, no one can blame you for what happened… I never knew your mother, but if she truly loved you she could never be disappointed in you… you’re such a *strong* and *brave* person… it’s sad because you shouldn’t have to be- you should be at school with your friends, with loving parents and *happy* … you got dealt a poor hand at life- that’s why I want to help you turn it around…. Because I see the *good* in you that you may have lost sight of…” Daniel said gently as he stroked Asher’s hair. Asher didn’t say anything after that- he just stayed hugging Daniel. Calypso was curled up on his shoulder nuzzling his neck- eventually he cried himself out and just fell asleep. At least for a moment, he felt safe.

Just a bit of that warmth

Chapter Summary

> Asher has a rough time and Lance does his best to try and comfort him, bit of a trigger warning for self-harm/thoughts of self-harm or self-hatred. Good bit of angst in this chapter because after that Daniel tries family therapy for these sad dysfunctional brothers

The next few days were a little awkward- Daniel kept going out of his way to be particularly nice and gentle with Asher, which was nice but oddly uncomfortable as well. One night he was having a particularly hard time, though. He was curled up on his bedroom floor trembling- he hated when he got like this. He kept picturing the way the knife looked tearing into his skin, and he just felt this *urge* to do it again- but he didn't want to. He didn't want to bleed, he didn't want to *hurt* anymore. He knew Daniel had said Asher could come get him if he was having issues, but he just couldn't bring himself to leave his room to go upstairs, and then have to awkwardly admit he wanted to go kill himself.

Instead, he shakily grabbed his phone. He struggled with the buttons a little, but eventually he managed to type out and send a message to Lance.

"cn you plz come back here" Was all he sent. He was honestly expecting Lance to not reply, so he just cursed himself for being so stupid and began scratching his arms again. If he tore hard enough he'd bleed- there was blood on his hands, shit- that hurt–

The sound of a phone buzzing startled him out of his beginning spiral. He grabbed the phone off the ground and looked at the text from Lance.

"Why? What's up?"

"please" Was all Asher sent back. He tossed the phone aside and began lightly thumping his head back against the wall, trying *so hard* to shut off his racing thoughts. Calypso was trying to nudge his way between Asher's hand and arm to stop him, but it was easy to ignore her feeble attempts.

He wasn't sure how long that went on for, but eventually there was a knock on the door. He didn't even have time to answer it before Lance swung the door open and stepped into the dark room- Calypso had just enough time to hide in the closet, luckily.

"What happened? Are you okay-?" Lance asked as he quickly went over to Asher, kneeling down in front of him. Before Asher could even say anything, Lance's eyes widened and he grabbed his arms, now bloodied and covered in scratches.

"Jesus christ- what did you do-??" He sounded even more worried. Tears welled in Asher's eyes as he just stared somewhat blankly past Lance.

"I-... I shouldn't have texted… you can go home…" He mumbled- god, his voice sounded so raspy and dry. He suddenly couldn't remember the last time he'd drank water.

"Absolutely not- I- we need to get you cleaned up, come on-" Lance muttered. He scooped Asher up into his arms and left the room, heading down the hall to the bathrooms. Asher just slumped against him and stared up at the ceiling. He hadn't really bled all that much, he was sure- but it was dark and the blood was sort of all over, so it probably looked worse than it was.

Damnit, he really didn't want to see it though. He closed his eyes and cringed as Lance ran cool water over his little wounds. He didn't realize until far too late that this meant Lance would be seeing his horribly scarred wrists now in the much brighter light of the bathroom. As soon as he made this revelation, he felt Lance turn his arm over right-side-up, and he instantly yanked it away.

"O-okay- I'm- I'm fine now-" He muttered, watching Lance with a somewhat scared deer in the headlights look.

"... Asher- let me see your arm- I need to bandage it up-" Lance's voice was cautious, but firm. Asher began to panic in that moment, his eyes instinctively flitting around the room for an escape, but Lance was between him and the one door to the relatively small room.

"N-no- Lance-" He pleaded.

" *Asher* ." Lance's voice grew more stern, and Asher's shoulder slumped as he just glared down at the floor. He let his arms go limp as Lance lifted one of them up to wrap it in bandages he'd grabbed. Neither of them spoke until he was done, and Asher was able to roll

his sleeves back down. He wrapped his arms around himself and refused to look at Lance. It was pretty obvious by the severity of the scars that it wasn't an accident- they were covering his wrists- luckily the newest ones were still old enough to still seem older than just a few weeks ago.

"... What- what happened-...?" Lance asked softly, his voice breaking. That caught Asher off guard- it made him want to curl up in a hole and sob.

"I-... I don't want to talk about it…" Asher whispered. Lance didn't say anything else as he just helped Asher back to his room- he wasn't carrying him now, but just kept an arm wrapped around Asher's shoulders so he could lean on Lance as they walked.

"Just- lay down- I need to make a call really quick-" Lance mumbled as he sat Asher down on the bed. Asher just nodded a little and laid on his back, staring up at the ceiling. He listened quietly to Lance as he stepped out of the room and called someone. It took quite a while for whoever it was to answer the phone- but eventually he heard Lance quietly apologizing and saying he wasn't coming home tonight.
He figured he must be talking to Dexter, so at that point he just zoned out until Lance came back into the room.

"Alright- do- do you want me to stay in here with you tonight?" Lance asked softly. Asher just shrugged a little, his eyes still trained up at the ceiling.

"... Okay- I'll stay here then, but if you want me to leave just say so-" He mumbled and hesitantly laid down next to Asher.

"... I've missed you a lot, ya know…." Asher whispered as he closed his eyes and rolled onto his side so he could face Lance.

"I-... I missed you too, kid…" Lance mumbled.

"No, you didn't…. it's okay, I understand why… I'm not nice to have around- you can find better company than me easily… if- if you really want me to leave, then I will… you won't have to hear from me anymore…." Asher said quietly.

"No- no, Asher- I *did* miss you- I- I *do* miss you- I don't-... I don't want you to leave, I just don't want you to be here where you're in danger…" Lance said quickly, his tone sounding almost hurt.

"Okay, Lance… but I don't have anywhere else to go… I'm not going

back to dad, and I don't want to live with you and Dexter…" Asher mumbled.

"I wish I understood *why* - it's not like Dexter is even home all that often…" Lance replied.

"Well either way, at least here I might actually find a fucking purpose… do something that makes up for all the other shitty things I've done… Unless you can give me a *good* reason to leave, then I'm going to stay…"

"Asher-..." Lance started.

"No. I have a right to choose my own future." Asher said firmly and rolled over again, this time so he was facing away from Lance. He hugged his pillow to his chest and buried his face into it, mumbling a muffled goodnight to Lance- who had gone silent and didn't respond.

The next morning, Lance was already gone when Asher woke up. He sighed and sat up, running a hand through his messy hair. He wasn't positive, but he had a feeling Lance was going to try to talk to him soon about last night. He decided he wanted to shower before then, so he grabbed a change of clothes which he hid Calypso in, and basically darted to the bathroom to avoid anyone else who was out of their rooms- which at the moment seemed to just be Chardy and Lucinda.

He shut and locked the bathroom door quickly, then bathed himself and Calypso.

He wasn't sure if Calypso needed baths, but she seemed to somewhat enjoy being in the water so he usually took the opportunity to toss some nice smelling soap on her as well.

When he was done, he dried off and changed into a sweater and cargo pants. His arms had scabbed over now, which always made everything look way worse than it actually was- but he always wore long sleeves anyways, so it didn't matter much to him.

He slipped out of the bathroom, his hair was still dripping with water as he hid the also soaking wet Calypso in one of the large pockets on his pants- they were black so no one would see the damp spot his little dragon was creating.

He saw Lance just stepping out from the elevator just as he rounded the corner into his bedroom- he quickly shut and locked the door before seeing anything else.

Sighing, he sat on his bed and carefully pulled Calypso out of his pocket.

“Alright- you might need to hide again. Maybe this time just hide under the bed- it’s a bit less messy for you-” He said quietly, jumping a little as he heard a knock on the door. He let Calypso hop off of his hand and onto the floor where she scurried under the bed to hide- he went to open the door as soon as he was out of sight.

Lance stood outside with an odd expression on his face- a distant, but oddly guilty looking expression.

“... What?” Asher asked, already sounding defensive.

“Me- me and Daniel need to talk to you upstairs-” Lance mumbled. Instantly Asher felt nervous- his palms began to sweat as he glared up at Lance.

“Why?” He demanded.

“Please just come with me, Asher-” Lance replied softly.

Asher glared at him before relenting and just brushing past him to head towards the elevator. He noticed Chardy watching him the whole way- it was unsettling, what could Chardy possibly know, though.

Lance followed quickly behind him and got in the elevator next to him, hitting the button for the floor above their current one. They remained silent as they waited for the elevator to stop again, and the metal doors to slide open.
Asher followed Lance as he stepped out and towards Daniel's room- the door was currently open, and from this angle he could see that Daniel was sitting on the main couch in the room, facing away from the door. Lance went and joined him on the couch, but Asher paused in the doorway.

“Okay, now what do you want?” He asked cautiously. Daniel turned to give him a little halfhearted smile, but the worry in his gaze was all too clear to Asher, so all he could do was frown back and cross his arms.

“Why don’t you come sit down, Asher?” Daniel suggested softly. He didn’t particularly want to, but before he could voice that thought his feet were already moving to sit on the other side of Daniel than the side that Lance was on.

“Why? What’s going on?” He pressed, staring intensely at Daniel.

“... Well, Lance came to me earlier with some concerns- mainly about you, and I just wanted to talk to you about them-” The man replied, and Asher felt himself stiffen up. He looked away from Daniel and just stared at the ground, trying to tune everything out before it got too overwhelming.

“... Okay.” He mumbled after a while.

“He told me about some scars he saw- where… where did you get those?” Daniel asked, and Asher just shrugged.

“I know this isn’t a comfortable conversation to have, son- but it’s important to be honest with each other here, so that we can help you-” The man added in a soft tone. That caught Asher off guard and snapped him out of the beginnings of his trance. Daniel had just called him ‘son’- it shouldn’t have startled him as much as it had- after all, loads of older men called younger ones that- but yet it still did spook him.

“... I don’t- I don’t need help. There’s nothing you can do to stop it-” Asher mumbled, still not looking at Daniel.

“Why do you say that..?” Daniel asked.

“Because I don’t *want* to stop it.” Asher muttered back. He knew he shouldn’t have said that the second the words passed his lips, but it was too late now.

“What do you mean?”

“Did you not hear me or something, old man?” He snapped.

“There’s no need for–” Daniel began, but Lance spoke over him.

“What the hell is wrong with you?? We’re worried about you, Asher-!” His big brother shouted.

“Oh yeah, so worried you had to ditch me with our abusive dad. Thanks a lot, I’m really feeling that care and concern now.” Asher shot back.

“Boys, stop it at once- I will not allow this to turn into a screaming match.” Daniel said firmly, and Lance went silent. Asher just glared at the floor.

“Okay- It seems like being straightforward works a lot better with you. Asher, did you hurt yourself?” Daniel asked, his voice softening now. Asher just nodded a little bit, not looking up at him. The silence that filled the room was *deafening* until Daniel spoke again.

“Why..?”

“Just felt like it.” Asher mumbled with a shrug. The man next to him sighed, gently setting a hand on his shoulder.

He hated this, he hated every part of it. He felt so *trapped* here, like he didn't have a choice for what to say or do.

“That isn’t healthy, kid- things are going to have to start changing if we’re going to keep you safe and–” Now Asher cut him off.

“Nothing needs to change. I haven’t killed myself yet, have I?” He muttered.

“Asher that’s not- the point- the point is that you *feel* like you need to do that, and that’s so unhealthy for such a young mind. I think therapy is a good start- would you rather it be with me or with someone we hire? I swear anything you say with either would be one hundred percent confidential-” Daniel spoke softly.

“No. Therapy didn’t help me last time, it won’t help me now.” Asher replied coldly.

“Then what do you think *would* help?”

“A fucking time machine.” He said sarcastically.

“Okay, this is a serious conversation, kid- I think maybe it’s time we talk about the night you got Calypso-” Daniel suggested, and Asher noticed Lance stiffen from the corner of his eye.

“... Who?” Lance asked.

“.... My dragon.” Asher replied before Daniel could.

“ *What* ?? And you didn’t tell me-??” Lance demanded.

“Hang on, Lance- I want you to remember here that you have been keeping things from Asher too. It’s not fair to get upset at him for keeping secrets if you are too, okay?” Daniel said lightly, his tone a little tight.

“That’s completely different! I would tell him if my phoenix came-!” Lance argued.

“Would you??” Asher demanded.

“Yes! Of course I would!” Lance insisted, turning to him.

Asher opened his mouth to reply but Daniel spoke over him.

“Okay, enough. Lance, if you cannot keep from shouting I’ll have to ask you to leave, but right now I have a much more important question for Asher.” Daniel said sternly. Asher crossed his arms and glared at the floor as if he could burn holes into the rug. He didn’t verbally respond, so the room was left in a tense silence until Daniel spoke again.

“Alright, Asher, I need you to answer this question seriously. Why did Calypso show up? What happened that night-?” The man's voice shifted to be almost sickly sweet- that soft, gentle tone that made Asher *think* he could trust him. Made him think he could speak freely, made him forget how much of a mistake it was whenever he did choose to openly speak.

“I-... Lance had just left, I think I was mad at my dad or something- maybe they fought, I don’t know. But I- I went upstairs and I found- I found the knife that he used when he-...” Asher let out a shaky sigh. His voice had gotten weak and brittle as everything came flooding back- it was so weird though, like it was all blurry. He couldn’t quite figure out the right details of it, which gave him an odd sense of anxiety.

“I took the knife into the bathroom with me and-... that was- that was the first time I *really* tried anything like that and- and then Calypso scratched at the outside of the door- I don’t-... I don’t know how she got in the house, but I kind of wish she didn’t sometimes… would’ve saved a lot of people a lot of trouble…” He whispered. He wished he could say that confession felt like a weight off his shoulders, but honestly he felt like he was carrying the weight of mountains on top of him- he could barely get enough air in his constricted lungs, the world felt blurry as he kept his now teary eyes trained at the ground.

His words hung heavy in the air as no one else spoke for quite a while, and the next thing he felt was the couch shifting and someone firmly wrapping their arms around him. He trembled as he slowly reached out his arms to hug them back- he had an odd lack of coordination at the moment, so he ended up just grabbing onto their shirt. He felt a

hand run through his hair, and everything gradually started to feel a little more *real* .

He realized his eyes were closed, but he didn't want to open them. Everything gradually started to feel a little less fuzzy or muffled, and he came to the conclusion that it was Lance hugging him when he felt those warm, soft wings wrap around him.

He'd missed this so *, so much* . He wished he could just freeze time here- he was certain he'd not get to experience this again for a long, long time- if ever before he inevitably bit the dust.

"I'm sorry I wasn't there, kid… I wish you'd told me this at the time…" Lance whispered softly.

"I didn't want you to feel the same way that I did when Dexter did that…" Asher whispered back, his voice crackling meekly. Lance didn't respond, and after a moment he felt another strong pair of arms wrap around the both of them. The angle was a bit funny since Lance had had to stand up to hug Asher and was now sort of leaning over him, but he was grateful for the comfort regardless.

When Daniel eventually let go of them, Lance pulled away as well, but he shifted to firmly place his hands on Asher's shoulders. Asher looked up at him with slightly blurred vision as he watched his big brother, who had a stern expression.

"Asher, listen to me- I don't care what's going on, or how little we've spoken, or if all we do is fight- if *anything* like that happens again I need you to *call me* .

Do you understand?" He asked firmly. Asher slowly nodded and tried to avoid eye contact by looking up at the ceiling instead. It's not that he didn't *want* to trust Lance, but he knew that ultimately when it came down to it, if he was having issues he'd rather deal with them on his own than call his brother.

"I need you to tell me- I need you to *promise* me, Asher- please-" Lance said, his voice breaking into a slightly more pleading tone. Asher only then noticed the tears gathering in the young man's eyes, and he felt a sharp stab of guilt deep in his chest.

"... okay… I- I promise-..." He mumbled, his voice raspy and weak.

"Okay… good…" Lance mumbled, his tone clearly relieved.

The things we hold on to

Chapter Summary

> Asher becomes the best at doing stupid things in a smart way from here on out, and he tries to be nicer to Calypso who is lonely. Lance keeps spiraling, Asher keeps spiraling, Daniel starts spiraling, I started spiraling too :D
> Also little trigger warning for underage smoking, and threatened violence

Things started to get a little better after that- he and Lance started spending more time together. It was awkward for a while but it started to get better.

Daniel and Lance had a mandatory search of Asher's room to take away anything harmful, but to make sure no one else really knew about his issues they had said it was because he lost something relating to his spirit guide, and that was startling enough to hear that he had one for no one to really ask any further questions.

Asher managed to convince them not to send him to therapy, however- instead he could just sort of vent to Daniel while he was instructed on how to beat up a punching bag or something.

He still hadn't really been eating much though, the only meal they all really had together was dinner, so he'd only eat a bit of that and claim he had a big lunch whenever he needed to not eat. Lance seemed suspicious of his excuses, but they weren't really at the point of closeness for Lance to speak on things like that again.

One day, he overheard Chardy talking to Lucinda about a mission or something. He didn't care too much about that usually, until he heard that Lance was going to be going on said mission. Once Lucinda left, Asher headed over to Chardy.

"Hey- what was that about Lance going somewhere?" He asked, trying to sound nonchalant.
"Oh I- don't know if I should tell you- I'm sorry, Asher- you know we're all supposed to be pretty quiet about what goes on here and-..." Chardy sort of trailed off as Asher began to speak quickly.

"I don't need to know a ton of stuff- just- I wanna know when Lance is going and how dangerous it'll be- please?" Asher tried to make him

sound much more worried than he was. Sure, he might be a tiny bit worried- but Lance could probably fend for himself and all. That didn't mean Asher couldn't play the concerned sibling card to get what he wanted, though.

"... Fine- next Friday night he's going to some party to get some information- I don't know much more than that, and can't tell you more anyways- I don't think you need to worry, though. He does that kinda stuff all the time-" Chardy reassured.

"Okay, if you say so-" Asher mumbled before slipping off to his room. A party, hm? Now he'd just have to figure out who the host was. He spent a little more time listening and paying attention after that- enough that he learned the name of the guy hosting this party, and from there he was able to get all the information he needed.

He was a rich asshole, nearing his fifties- he'd been hosting parties lately. His money was clearly dirty money, which was more than likely why Daniel wanted Lance to get it. Next, he did a little online stalking and managed to find a coffee shop that his assistant often went to. With just two days until the party now, he went to that coffee shop and waited until he saw the assistant. She was a pretty woman- mid twenties, probably sleeping with that guy. She wore a fancy suit with an odd skirt attachment on the pants- he never understood weird fashion trends like that, but he'd never say anything about it.

He "accidentally" bumped into her just as she was leaving and spilled the coffee all over him. It was hot, but he wasn't seriously burned, he was pretty sure, so he could deal with it later.

"Shit! Oh, I'm so sorry-" She said quickly as she frantically grabbed for a bundled handful of napkins.

"Oh man, sorry- My fault, I wasn't looking where I was going-" He chuckled awkwardly as he half-heartedly cleaned up his sweater with the napkins.

"Damnit, are you hurt?? That coffee was so hot-" She sounded slightly panicked.

"Oh, no- I'm fine I swear-" He insisted.

"Okay okay- fuck- I need to order another one but I- I have so much shit to do today-" She mumbled to herself as she turned back to the service counter.

“Hey, as payment how about you give me like- fifty bucks and I’ll help you out for a few hours?” He offered as he followed her back to the bewildered looking cashier woman.

Surely there was no way that would work, he was a stranger and a kid at that, but when he looked into the woman's eyes he knew she was actually considering it.

“... Well- I suppose I could use the help- fine then, it’s mainly just errands, though-” She warned.

“That’s fine- I need some extra cash anyways.” He shrugged.

And that’s how it began- they ordered the coffee and she brought it back to the big boss man, then they headed off to do mundane things like picking up drycleaning and shopping for fancy mens jewelry. He helped speed things along by keeping things moving whenever the woman- Tina- had to take phone calls, or by acting like an annoying kid in the jewelry store so they’d stop giving bullshit prices to overcharge Tina. She frequently complimented him on being so sneaky, which felt odd but he didn’t mind.

At the very end of the day, they headed back to the big rich guys office, and he was invited in. Tina raved about how useful he was- clearly she was tired of doing all these things alone.

“Hm, interesting. I would’ve thought you were above grabbing a random child for help, Tina. But I applaud your resourcefulness.” He said sarcastically.

“Apologies, sir- but may I cut in here?” Asher asked softly, and the man just nodded his approval.

“Thank you- see, today has made me realize something- if you’re gonna get where you wanna be in life, you have to push for the things you want- and now I realize I want a job, to earn my money honorably instead of just mowing lawns or cleaning other people's trash. So I’d like to make an offer- a few days a week, I’d like to help Tina with her simple tasks, so she can focus better on the more important things that you’re paying her for. I won’t ask for much in return, honest- simple minimum wage will do for me-” Asher explained. He knew it was a long shot, but by playing into things he’d read about this man saying before, he hoped to manipulate the situation into his own favor. The man seemed to think about it for a moment before giving his response.

“Fine then, two days a week, six hours a day sound fair?” He replied coolly.

“Wonderful! How does Friday and Tuesday work?” He offered.

“Mm, Friday’s no good. We all leave early that day for my own… personal events.” Mr. Burton replied.

“Ah, I see- Oh! Is it your parties? I’ve heard wonderful things- goodness, I’ve dreamt of attending one for years- of course I understood I was too young before, but I’m nearly seventeen now-” He lied. He knew he could barely pass as the age he actually was, this was such a stretch- but the man seemed old enough to not know the difference well.

“Oh yes, they are quite grand. Perhaps it would do you some good to attend one, if you believe you can contain yourself and not embarrass your new employer.” Burton suggested.

“Oh of course, sir! If you would be so kind I swear I will be on my best behavior- It’s just- I don’t have anything quite so grand I could wear to such an elite event-” He mumbled the last bit.

“Not a concern. Come here Friday afternoon and we’ll have a suit tailored for you, then we’ll go straight to my mansion.” He said with a wave of his hand.

“Thank you so much, sir. Oh- and does Monday and Tuesday work better for you?” Asher asked.

With that foot in the door, before he knew it he was stepping into one of the biggest houses he’d ever seen in his life. It was beyond fancy- he felt like a criminal just walking on the perfectly polished floors. Dozens of people were already there, and in the several large rooms that this party spanned through, there was a wet bar, countless food tables, and people walking around serving drinks.

It felt damn near like a Disney movie, with how high-end and elaborate everything was, even the decorations. He tried not to spend too much time admiring though, just trying to make it look like he was when in reality he was observing the people around him rather than the things.

Asher had drank alcohol before, but he didn’t really enjoy the taste

much so he avoided it for the most part. He stuck around Tina in the beginning, who was in a fancy red sparkly dress and chattering away with some other women.

He didn't see any signs of Lance so far, but he kept his eyes peeled as he was dragged around and introduced to various different people, mostly all over the age of forty.

It was painfully obvious that this was these middle-aged people's last attempts at making themselves feel younger and more fun than they ever were. It was pathetic, but he was pretending it was the coolest thing ever. He was good at pretending to like people, he'd realized.

At one point, it was getting dark and he wandered off a little. He walked through a mostly empty hallway other than just a handful of doors on either side. He turned his head just in time to hear a door open just behind him, his ear twitched as he felt himself be yanked backwards before he could even turn all the way to see who it was.

He stiffened and tried to twist away from the strong pair of hands that pulled him into a nearly pitch black room, one hand covering his mouth while the other shoved him back against the door.

"Asher what the *fuck* are you doing here??" Lance's *very* pissed off voice hissed. He let go of Asher, but Asher didn't move since he still couldn't see a damn thing until his eyes adjusted.

"Aw shit, heyyy man- listen- it's uh- kind of a whole thing and–" He started, but Lance cut him off.

"You are *not* supposed to be here. You need to leave and get your ass home *now* . We'll talk about this later." Lance muttered.

"Well I- I can't- Lance- I've got my own business here-" Asher mumbled back, a little too startled still to just tell Lance to piss off.

"Jesus christ, can you just deal with the kid so we can get going?" He heard Victor whisper from deeper in the room. He hadn't realized Victor was there- he needed to start paying more attention to things like that.

"Yeah yeah, I'm dealing with it." Lance muttered.

"Alright well how about this- you finish up whatever the hell you're doing here, and I'll keep the boss man outta this area. This is his house, ya know." Asher mumbled, shifting away from the door so he

could open it. Lance stopped him before he could, holding the door shut by pressing his hand against it and leaning his full body weight forward.

“Absolutely not. You need to leave- this is way too dangerous for you-” Lance insisted.

“I’ve been working with that guy for longer than you think, Lance. I can handle myself.” Asher hissed as he pulled out his phone and turned on the flashlight so he could see a little. He still couldn’t make out much of the room, which made him anxious as hell though.

“ *What* ??” Lance demanded.

“If you let me out of this room right now then I’ll tell you everything once we’re both back at Daniel’s.” Asher replied firmly.
“ *No* , Asher- absolutely not, you–” Lance started, but was cut off by the sound of something thumping heavily against the door. The room went dead silent as someone clearly started fumbling with the doorknob- likely a drunk person, Asher assumed.

It was like the air around them froze as they heard Mr. Burton speak from the other side of the door.

“Who the hell is in there??” He demanded.

“Fucking- *hide* -” Asher whispered as he shoved Lance away firmly, entirely guessing where the man was.

“Uh- it’s me, sir- I apologize- I thought I’d heard a sound, but I can’t see anything in this room and I can’t find the switch-” Asher said quickly, changing his tone to the one he’d always used with Burton. He just sort of lightened it to sound less threatening, and tried to sound more mature and less childish.

Mr. Burton pushed open the door now that nothing was stopping him, which cast enough light on the room for him to see that both Lance and Victor were suddenly nowhere to be seen.

“Good grief kid, I thought you said you’d be on your *best* behavior. I ought to send you home right now.” Burton grumbled as he turned on the light. Asher squinted a little, not used to the sudden brightness- the room seemed to be just a very simple guest bedroom.

“I know, sir- but I didn’t want to have heard something and later find out you were robbed, or worse- perhaps I shouldn’t have taken the

juice that kind waiter offered me. Please don't send me home-" Asher pleaded. Burton sighed and rolled his eyes, quickly scanning over the room before ushering Asher out and shutting off the light again.

"Walk with me, kid." He grumbled and shut the door once Asher was all the way out, then began walking back down the hall towards the more populated rooms. Asher followed silently, watching the old man with curiosity.

He led Asher past the crowds of people and up a set of stairs- after a few more turns and another hallway, they made it out to a balcony. Burton stood in front of the elegant stone railing and looked out over his garden, which was lit with fairy lights and had quite a few people strolling around under the various assortment of mostly oak trees. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter, his hands shook a little as he struggled to light one- all while Asher watched silently.

"... aren't you going to send me home, sir?" Asher asked timidly. Burton just chuckled a little and offered him a cigarette.

"Here. You ever had one of these before?" His gruff voice asked. Asher shook his head a little- he hadn't known many people who smoked,

"No, sir. Are you offering me one?" He replied.

"Yes, I am. Now take it." Burton grumbled. Asher took the cigarette and lit it, hesitantly bringing it up to his lips and drawing in a breath through it. It felt like his lungs were lit ablaze in that instant- he immediately started coughing, his pale hands gripping the railing as he tried not to drop the cigarette. Burton laughed, and his mind raced. He wondered if Burton could've somehow poisoned it, but why on earth would he have any reason to do that?

His hysterical coughing fit kept up for a good minute, until his eyes were watering and he thought he'd pass out- he was now kneeled over the railing and Burton didn't say anything until he caught his breath.

"Holy shit-" He mumbled.

"Yeah, first time's a bitch. Now try again, it'll be easier." Burton said coldly. Asher hesitated, his hands shaking as he repeated the previous motion to smoke. He was right though- it still burned his lungs and sort of felt like he wasn't breathing good air, but it didn't send him spiraling this time.

“Ya know-” Burton spoke suddenly, causing Asher to look over at him as he exhaled the smoke. It was oddly satisfying to watch how it danced and swirled around in the cool night air. “You remind me an awful lot of myself.”

“... Oh- thank you, sir-” Asher mumbled, his voice a little raspy from before.

“Hm. It would be such a shame to let all that intelligence go to waste, wouldn’t you agree?” Burton added.

“... Well- sure, I suppose so?”

“How would you like an apprenticeship with me?” The man offered.

“Oh- I- I would actually quite like that- but- I don’t know how well it would work-” Asher replied, a little taken aback.

“Why not?” Burton pressed.

“Well- see, I live with- with my dad and older brother, and they both have some quite specific ideas for how I ought to grow up. I’m doing quite a few extracurriculars already, and I fear they’d notice my absence from home quite often-” Asher quickly fabricated the story in his head, locking in the details as they came to him so he’d be able to sufficiently lie to Burton if asked questions later down the line.

“I understand. I would be willing to work around your schedule and send a driver to get you and bring you home whenever you need, though.” Burton replied.

“... Well- maybe I could make something work. What about three or four hours every morning during the weekdays? As long as I’m home before around one p.m I should be fine-” Asher answered.

“Perfect. What time do you wish for my driver to be there?”

“Eight a.m- but it can’t be right outside my apartment. If I may have your cell number, I’ll send you a street corner I’d like to be picked up and dropped off at-” Asher answered.

They worked out a few more details after that, and both finished smoking before heading inside again. The party had started to die down by now, but Asher hung around for another hour or so with Burton and his buddies. Maybe it was a new odd rush from lying, or from almost being caught with Lance earlier, or being caught *by*

Lance- but he was feeling a complete *rush* at the moment. Like something exciting had just happened and he was left just *buzzing* because of it.

Once he decided to leave, he said his proper goodbyes to everyone and began walking home- though at this point he was practically skipping.

Despite what he'd told Burton earlier, he hadn't actually had any alcohol- he felt so oddly *euphoric* though and he couldn't place his finger on why. As he approached Daniel's building he knew he *should* be feeling anxious- and he did a little, but not nearly as much as he should be considering what was about to happen.

As he headed into the main lobby, no one was there and the lights were dim- so he went to the elevator and headed up to the floor they lived on. He took a few deep breaths as he was swiftly brought upwards and to his impending fate.

He inhaled in preparation as the elevator doors opened into the light room, and he had just enough time to step out before Lance appeared from the corner of his vision and grabbed him.

"Jesus christ, Asher! Why are you *just now* getting home??" Lance asked, his voice was loud but Asher could tell it was from distress, but surprisingly not anger. Looking around, he saw that literally everyone was somewhere nearby, listening. Fucking vultures. Daniel was in the kitchen with Francis, both doing the dishes from dinner, though it felt oddly late for that. Chardy and Lucinda were very clearly pretending to play a card game, but Lucinda kept looking over at them every two seconds. Amelia and Victor seemed unbothered, though- both just watching the TV which was on some random crime show.

"I had to stay late to cover for you, relax-" Asher mumbled.

"Yes, I believe we all should have a little chat about that." Daniel spoke firmly. Now *that* made Asher anxious- he'd never heard that tone from Daniel before, and his body language was very tense.

"Alright, I get it- y'all are pissed I went there without telling anyone- but it wasn't *just* because of Lance's little mission and–" He began, but was cut off by Lance.

"Yeah, and exactly *how* did you figure out about that?" He demanded.

"You guys don't exactly make it difficult. I heard you yourself say

Burton's name, that's all I needed-" Asher replied, crossing his arms as he stared firmly up at Lance.

"Okay now *why* would you do that??" Lance asked, and Asher paused for a moment. He didn't have an immediate answer- why *did* he do it? He didn't care that much for being invited to do this, he didn't do it to spend time with Lance, and he wasn't really intentionally trying to piss anyone off.

"... I don't know-" He mumbled.

"You *don't know* ?? You gave me a heart attack! You could've been hurt or killed- I don't- what's *wrong* with you-?? Why on earth do you keep doing this shit?!" Lance began rambling, and Daniel stepped in here.

"Okay, that's enough- he messed up, but there's no need for–" Daniel began, but Lance shouted over him.

"No! You- fuck! You clearly don't care half as much as you fucking claim to or you would say more about all the shit this kid gets away with-! You don't get to tell me what I say to my own brother anymore!!" Lance snapped, causing everyone to glance over simultaneously. Daniel stopped what he was doing and made his way over to them, and Asher's heart dropped. That was it- Daniel hadn't ever gotten a serious temper with them from what Asher had seen, but surely this would be the straw to break the camel's back.

It felt like he was suddenly shut out of his own mind, forced to watch like it was on a movie screen.

His palms were sweaty and he stiffened up as he moved himself between Lance and Daniel. He couldn't protect his mom, but he could protect Lance if he just *tried hard enough* .

Daniel opened his mouth to speak but before he could even get a word out, Asher pulled a knife out of one of his pockets.

Perhaps a bit of an explanation was needed here- see, he'd gotten some of the money from helping Tina out, and he'd chosen to buy a pocket knife with it for protection. He wasn't stupid, he knew Mr. Burton and his buddies were sketchy- he didn't *want* bad things to happen to him, so he got protection. He didn't buy it with the intent of hurting himself, though it wasn't entirely off the table.

So, he pointed his brand new knife at Daniel- he didn't know it at the

time, but to everyone else in the room he just looked like a scared kid. In his mind he looked as unpredictable as he felt.

“Don’t come any closer!” He shouted, his voice shaking more than he would’ve liked. Daniel took a step back and watched him with wide eyes, lifting his hands away from his body so Asher could see he wasn’t grabbing anything.

“Okay, I won’t- it’s alright, kid-” Daniel spoke in a much softer tone than before.

Asher was about to speak again- to demand Daniel get farther away- but just then Lance lightly grabbed his shoulders to stop him.

In his blind panic, Asher spun around and turned the blade on Lance now- because in his mind that wasn’t his concerned brother. To him, that was an *enemy* . That was someone who wanted to hurt him, or to kill him. Maybe it was Dexter, maybe it was his *father* , or maybe it was some faceless person who wanted him *gone* .

“Don’t touch me!” He panicked a little as he realized there was essentially nowhere he could go without backing up into someone or moving uncomfortably close to them.

“Asher, he’s not going to hurt you- look at me-” Daniel spoke calmly. He was relieved as Lance backed away and closer to Daniel, so he could move back against the wall to get farther away from everyone.

He locked his gaze back into Daniel, his hands shaking as he gripped the knife. He noticed his vision started to get spotty and he felt a little dizzy- he realized he wasn’t sure if he’d eaten yet that day.

“Leave me alone- I don’t- I’ll hurt you-” Asher muttered, his voice growing a little raspier as his consciousness slowly returned to him, his blind panic beginning to fade, leaving an odd embarrassment in its wake.

“No, kid- you won’t- because you don’t want to hurt anyone, do you? This is a safe place, and I know it feels really scary right now, but I need you to trust me, alright?” Daniel whispered as he took a small step closer to Asher. He thought for a moment, his mind still a little hazy as he shuffled back, only to bump into the wall behind him.

“... Ok-okay- I- I want to go to my room-” He mumbled as he slowly folded the knife back in on itself and slipped it into his pocket.

“Alright, then let's go- I’m going to walk with you, but no one else will- okay?” Daniel said softly, and Asher nodded a bit as he stumbled towards his room. Daniel followed a bit behind, being sure not to get too close to Asher until they were both in the room and the door was shut. Tears welled in Asher’s eyes as he turned back to Daniel, hesitating a moment before he hugged him tightly.

“... i-.... I’m sorry….” He whispered.

“I know, kid…” Daniel whispered back as he hugged Asher tightly.

“What was going on in your mind..?” The man asked.

“I-... Lance yelled at you and I thought-... you were mad, I thought you were going to hurt him… I couldn’t protect my mom when my father hurt her, but… I’m older now- I can protect people now…” Asher murmured, a tear slipping down his cheek as he hid his face in Daniel’s shoulder.

“Oh, Asher… you know I’d never hurt you, or your brother, right…?” Daniel asked softly, running a hand through Asher’s hair.

“I don’t think I could believe there’s anyone who wouldn’t… even if you don’t mean to sometimes-.... things just happen…” Asher mumbled, and Daniel hugged him a little tighter.

“You’re right, things do just happen sometimes… but I *promise* you, Asher- I promise I’m here to help and protect you. I will never do anything to intentionally hurt you, and if I do by mistake hurt you somehow, you need to tell me, alright..?” Daniel replied in a gentle tone.

“Okay…” He replied, knowing he likely wouldn’t take any of this seriously.

“I *mean it* , Asher… I know not a lot of people have been particularly honest or truthful with you, but right now I am being completely truthful…” Daniel insisted.

“... If-... if you say so….” Asher whispered, and Daniel just sighed. He kept hugging Asher and stroking his hair for a while until he was completely calmed down, then he shifted away to just keep his hands on Asher’s shoulders.

“You ought to talk to Lance- I’m sure he’s planning on staying the night here. If you don’t want anyone else asking you questions, just let

them know you don't want to answer them right now-" Daniel instructed.

"Okay-... but- can I tell you something-..?" Asher asked quietly.

"Of course, kid… what is it?"

"Well I-... I sort of- agreed to an apprenticeship with Mr. Burton- and I- I don't plan on backing out of it-" Asher said quietly, and Daniel suddenly looked nervous.

"Oh- Asher- why?? He- do you know what kind of person he is? There's a reason we're trying to–" Daniel began, but Asher quickly spoke again.

"I know, I know- I'm being careful- but wouldn't it make sense to have someone on the inside? If- if you need me to I'll wear a recording device or something but- I just have this strong feeling that I *need* to stick with this-" Asher explained.

"... I- I don't know, kid- it's a dangerous spot to have put yourself in, and there's just nothing we could gain from it that's worth risking your life so much- Lance is going to be beside himself when he finds out, you know that-" Daniel replied.

"Yeah but- Daniel I can handle myself, ya know? I was on my own for a long time and had to deal with worse than an old man who actually wants to *teach* me something-" Asher mumbled.

"You're learning how to protect yourself, but you're nowhere near the point where I would be assigning you to go on missions like the other kids- especially not one as high profile and on-going as this one is-" Daniel replied.

"Then keep teaching me, and in the meantime I'll bring my knife and just be careful- this is a great opportunity, honestly. You have to see that- I can learn business shit from the guy, and I can keep him distracted while you guys do whatever you need to do in the background- please?" He asked softly. Daniel looked down at him with a reluctant expression, before sighing heavily.

"... Alright, fine- but I am going to give you a device to record audio with- and we need to tell your brother. Also I need you to give me the knife until it's time for you to actually go there, and then bring it back to me the second you get home. Deal?" Daniel eventually caved, and Asher smiled a bit.

“Deal-” He basically flung out his hand to shake Daniel’s, who still seemed very reluctant as he shook Asher’s hand.

“But- can we just wait until tomorrow to tell him?” He added quickly.

“That’s probably for the best- everyone’s tired and I’m sure emotions will be running high. You should stay in here while I go assess the damage- please hand over the knife now-” Daniel replied, and Asher quickly handed over the blade.

He watched as Daniel stepped out of his room and shut the door behind himself, then he quickly moved to lock the door and go sit on the edge of his bed.

“Calypso?” He called softly, looking around to see where the little dragon might be. She soon wriggled out from beneath a little pile of laundry on the floor near the closet, then came scampering over to him. He gently scooped her up and cradled her. He hadn’t been spending as much time with them lately, which he felt a little bad for. He spent a lot of time cooped up in Asher’s room, so he decided that since tomorrow he didn’t have anything to do with it being the weekend, he could bring them out to a park and spend some time there.

“There you are- hey, wanna go to the woods tomorrow?” He asked softly, with a small smile. He often got annoyed at Calypso, because he could occasionally feel her thoughts urging him to act differently- mainly just pushing him to act with more affection or kindness. He knew it wasn’t fair of her to try to get him to act on how she was feeling, or how he may or may not be truly feeling- but it was hard not to get annoyed when he never really felt like he had full control of his own body, and some of that feeling did originate from Calypso.

The little dragon made a quiet trill-like sound and some of her soft fur puffed up like it often did when she was excited.

“Alright, then we’ll go once me and Daniel get a chance to talk with Lance. I wonder if there’s a way I could ever sneak you out to Mr. Burton’s place- I know he’s like a psychopathic asshole and stuff but he’s also stupid rich. His house is so fancy- and he is quite smart- I’m hoping I can get some of his knowledge before this eventually blows up in my face-” Asher muttered the last part under his breath.

Calypso nuzzled against him and crawled up his arm so they could curl up on his shoulder, purring softly.

Keep going, you worthless boy. Keep living

Chapter Summary

> Everyone argues for a bit while Asher dissociates, then Asher and Chardy have a sweet and meaningful conversation. A little bit of fluff before Mr. Burton ruins it all

They weren't disturbed for the rest of the night and soon went to sleep. The next morning, Asher woke up and could honestly say he was dreading having to talk to Lance. The night before, even after his little freakout he still had that odd, almost distant euphoric feeling- but that was gone now. Now all he felt was dread and anxiety as he got out of bed and got ready for the day. When he was ready, he hid Calypso in his shirt and went to find Daniel, who was in the kitchen making breakfast.

He forgot Daniel always made every meal on the weekends- now he needed an actual excuse to not eat. He definitely didn't deserve to, especially after last night.

"Good morning, Asher-" Daniel said when he noticed Asher standing there. Chardy, Victor and Amelia were all sitting out in the living room and they all three turned to look over when they heard that.

"Morning. Where's Lance?" Asher asked, trying to ignore the various eyes watching him.

"He hasn't left his room yet. I was thinking that this should likely be something we all talk about after breakfast- does that sound alright?" Daniel suggested. Asher hesitated a moment, but he figured everyone else would figure out one way or another.

"Okay- sure. I'm gonna go take a shower- don't wait for me-" He mumbled as he headed to the bathrooms.

Once inside, he was glad to be alone. Calypso chittered softly as he set her on the counter with a heavy sigh.

"Look, I don't need to eat every single day- besides I'm sure I'd get sick if I ate now. Just- don't cause any trouble, alright? I promise we'll still go to the park later-" Asher said quietly, but he could feel the

little creatures disapproval with him.

He took his time showering, trying to avoid being out there at all during the course of breakfast. Daniel did try to knock on the door and get him to come out at some point, but Asher just said he'd be out soon and was left alone after that.

He got dressed and waited a little longer for good measure, then he hid Calypso again and left the bathroom. As he passed by he saw that everyone else were all sitting at the table, except for Daniel and Lance who were both in the kitchen- it looked like just about everyone was done eating though, at least.

He tossed his towel into the dirty laundry, then joined Daniel and Lance in the kitchen. They were just talking about everything that happened yesterday when Lance broke into Burton's house, and from the very little bit that Asher heard it sounded like it went pretty well.

He sort of just leaned against the counter and stayed silent until Daniel addressed him.

"Alright, it looks like everyone has finished up- are you ready to talk or do you want to eat something first?" The man asked.

"I'm ready to talk now-" Asher mumbled.

"Okay- if you're sure-" Daniel spoke softly as he headed to the table. Asher sighed and followed him, walking next to Lance briefly before they both went to sit at their designated seats.

Asher sort of blanked out for the conversation- all he really registered was a good bit of yelling, mainly from Lance. He tried to make eye contact with whoever was talking at the moment, but he eventually just ended up staring out at the wall behind Lance. At some point, Daniel turned to Asher and called his name a few times. Snapping out of his daze, he looked over to the man with mild confusion.

"... What-?" He mumbled, and Daniel looked a little concerned.

"Are- are you alright?" Daniel asked.

"I'm fine- just a little tired of arguing to have basic rights." He muttered in response.

" *Basic rights* ??" Lance demanded. "You're a *child* ! You can't even *legally* be working for this guy- and beyond that, what do you think is

going to happen when he gets bored of you?! He's going to–" Lance shouted, but Asher cut him off.

"What, move to another city and ghost me??" Asher snapped as he stood up. "If you get in the way of letting me do this, I will leave this place and never come back. You don't get a fucking say in where my life goes after you *chose* to step out of it." He hissed as he walked around the table and out of the room.

"Asher, wait! You don't just get to walk out like that-!" Lance started to follow him, but was apparently stopped as Asher made it to his room without being interrupted again.

He locked his door and flopped down into bed- a second later Calypso wriggled out from where he'd been hidden and curled up on Asher's chest with a soft trill.

"I know, I know… we'll go soon, I promise-" Asher mumbled, lightly patting her on the head. She nuzzled into his hand and chirped quietly.

Asher just laid there for a long while, closing his eyes and just sort of tuning the world out as he lightly stroked his dragon. He jolted up as he heard a knock, causing Calypso to suddenly fall into his lap and make a little annoyed hiss as she was abruptly awoken.

"What?" He asked quickly, too dazed to sound annoyed.

"Hey Asher, it's me, Chardy- can I come in..?" Chardy asked softly from the other side of the door. He hesitated a moment before getting up and going to the door, unlocking it as he mumbled his response.

"Sure. What's up?" He opened the door- Calypso hadn't bothered to hide now. Pretty much everyone knew about her anyways, but no one other than Daniel had officially seen her yet. She stayed curled up on the bed, watching intently with her big blue eyes.

"I just wanted to come and check on you- we haven't been talking much these last few days and- well- I'm a little worried. You and Lance have been arguing a lot- it's taking a heavy hit on both of you-..." Chardy said softly as he stepped into the room.

"Yeah, well- he shouldn't get a say on what happens to me." Asher muttered as he moved to sit on the edge of the bed, picking Calypso up and cradling her.

“He’s still your brother, though- he clearly cares about you…” Chardy replied, hesitantly inching to sit next to him. Chardy looked at Calypso for a moment before shifting his gaze back up to Asher. Their eyes were almost similar in color, if Asher stared long enough.

“I don’t doubt that, but he cares about who he *thinks* I am- not because of who I actually am. Make sense? He stopped talking to me over a year ago, we stopped even being remotely friendly *years* ago. I don’t even think he believes half the things I say happened during that time- I know he doesn’t believe a damn thing I say about fucking Dexter. And I- I just can’t afford to keep hurting because of my relationships with other people right now-” Asher mumbled.

Chardy sighed and sat next to him, watching him in silence for a moment as he stroked Calypso.

“... You know- I had a big brother too… He- he never really cared about me, though. If I’m being honest I-... I get a little jealous sometimes- I’ve never known what it’s like to have a brother even *want* to be protective of you. I- I’m sure it gets annoying, I understand- you don’t want to be smothered. You’re learning who you are, and you feel like he’s trying to mold you differently- but you can fix all of that with words, Asher. I’ll never get that chance- to fix things with my brother- and life is just so… unpredictable- in this line of work you never really know how much time you’re gonna have left with someone. I don’t want to tell you what to do, but I will say that if I were you, I’d try to make up with him sooner rather than later-” Chardy explained gently. Somehow he spoke in a way that made more sense to Asher than anything anyone else had really said when trying to urge him to be nicer.

His shoulders slumped as he looked down at the ground.

“Yeah, maybe you’re right… it- it’s hard, though- he makes things hard. He pretends like he’s there for me, and he tries to be so *gentle* and so *caring* , but was he there when I *really* needed him? No- he wasn’t there when my mom was k-... when my dad did those horrible things. He wasn’t there when I got Calypso, he wasn’t there any of the times I *really* needed him- now he wants to worm his way back into my life and I- I *can’t* lose anyone else… I just can’t…” Asher's voice lowered to a whisper near the end.

“I know it can seem like the only option, but you can’t fix everything by shutting everyone out… it’s- hard to find a reason to live when you don’t have anyone to live for, ya know..? You and me-... we’re similar,

Asher- I know how you think- at least when it comes to things like this…" Chardy replied softly. Asher just remained silent for a moment before abruptly standing up.

"Alright, well- that's depressing enough for today. I'm gonna take Calypso out to the park for a few hours-" He muttered, and Chardy stood up as well.

"Oh- can- can I please come with you? The tension around this place is so dense-" Chardy asked, suddenly perking up a little. Asher hesitated a second before shrugging a bit.

"Alright, fine-" He mumbled. Calypso tucked herself into Asher's pocket as he left the room, quickly followed by Chardy.

"Thanks- I've been needing an excuse to get out-" Chardy chuckled a little as they both headed down the hall to the elevator. Lance watched them silently from the kitchen as they left, apparently having been in the middle of doing the dishes with Amelia.

Once they were in the elevator, he felt an odd sense of relief trickle through him. Chardy seemed to sense as much as he also relaxed.

They both left the building and walked to a park- about a twenty minute walk that was painfully silent. Once they got there, Asher instantly headed to a more secluded and thickly wooded part so he could let Calypso run around a little.

Flopping onto the ground, which was covered in sharp pine needles and dead leaves, he leaned back against a nice big oak tree. The forest was nice- it was a little chilly as summer was beginning to come to an end and creep into fall. The trees blocked out most of the sky, and it was a cloudy day so most of the surrounding area was shrouded in shadows. It might look a little gloomy, but Asher could honestly say he felt quite comfortable there.

He helped Calypso out of his jacket, letting the little dragon crawl onto his hand and wrap her long tail around his wrist. She surveyed the area from her perch for a moment before leaping off. She spread her wings so she could glide effortlessly down to the ground, where she started sniffing and pawing around to move the leaves, pine needles, and soil.

Chardy watched for a while before once again coming to sit right next to Asher- and Asher was glad that he didn't feel instant annoyance at the intrusion on his personal space.

“You know… I’ve never been able to predict anything about you-” Chardy mumbled quickly, glancing around as if it was something he wasn’t supposed to be talking about.

“... What do you mean?” Asher asked, growing slightly suspicious. It felt almost like an invasion of privacy to think of Chardy trying to look into his future without telling him.

“Well- I mean, obviously I actually have to *use* my power- but a lot of the time if I brush my hand against someone I just sort of accidentally see things- nothing huge, but like what they are going to eat for dinner that night. What a lot of people don’t realize is I can also see the past too, so sometimes it will be something they went through that morning- little stuff like that-” Chardy explained.

“Okay-... and?” Asher pressed.

“And- whenever I’ve mistakenly touched you, it’s just- weird- like one morning we spent *all* day together, but when we brushed hands later I saw you doing something completely different that morning. Instead of seeing you having breakfast with us, I saw you in an *office* - it was such a short moment that I didn’t see any details, but I just *knew* it was *supposed* to be memories from that morning. It doesn’t make sense- I’ve *never* read anything wrong before, Asher- but I feel as though I’ve never read anything *right* from you-” Chardy started to sound slightly distressed as he finished his explanation. Asher looked out at the forest around them, suddenly going deep into thought. He could feel Chardy’s eyes on him, though- those deep-sea blue eyes watching his every movement.

“That’s odd…” He mumbled eventually. Chardy seemed almost caught off guard by his lack of reaction.

“Yeah, it doesn’t make any sense- it’s been weighing on my mind for a few days now. Daniel told me not to talk to anyone about it, so no one starts doubting my ability- I’ve been testing it on *everyone* at this point, and still I’m always right with everyone else…” Chardy murmured.

“Well- maybe it’s because my brain is so fucked up. Maybe if you tried it on people in jail or mental asylums it wouldn’t work too- or maybe it’s a perk of being a dragon or whatever. I haven’t had any of those pop up- Melinda thought I might be resistant to the cold because of it, but if anything I’ve found that I’m *more* affected when it’s cold. Oh, please don’t tell Lance that though- or he’ll be badgering me to put on

jackets that make me overheat-" Asher said, getting quieter at the end.

"... Okay- you and Daniel still haven't figured out your ability yet, have you?" Chardy asked, and Asher sighed.

"Nope. He doesn't want to give up, but I know he'll never find one. I've always been useless, ya know? I don't think there's a single thing I can do to be useful to just about anyone- I guess that's why I keep doing stupid shit. It's why I put myself in bad spots, because at least if I could say I'm dying for a *purpose* then I wouldn't feel so bad for how I lived-" Asher rambled. It felt like word vomit- like once he started he just couldn't stop, and now he realized he'd dug his grave too deep as Chardy stared at him, a sad expression crossing over his face.

"You're not- you aren't useless, Asher… It's- life is hard right now. We've all been through stuff like this- I get it, I really do- but you need to keep finding reasons to just *keep going* - some day, maybe years from now, you'll get to look back and be happy you chose to stay around… It took me a while to get to that point, and sometimes I still question if it was all worth it- but at the end of the day I'm *alive* , and I have a family here- I have a family that *chose me* , not one I was born into. As much as I wish I could say I have loving parents and siblings, I would never give up what I have now to get a biological family. I've found people who- even though they may not all understand me- they *care* about me, and I care about them. I would love nothing more than to give you that same feeling- it feels so *nice* , when you settle into bed at night and realize that for once you feel *loved* … you know you're going to wake up with a purpose, and no matter what you'll have people by your side. I don't know you very well yet, but Asher I *want* to be by your side- I want to be your *family* , and I want you to be happy. If- if you're ever having difficult thoughts, please come talk to me- I know it's hard when it comes to Daniel and Lance, they tell each other everything- but I *swear* I won't say anything you don't want me to. I know sometimes it's just not the best thing for someone to be forced to talk before they're ready, so you can talk to me- or we can just be alone together, if that's what you prefer…" It felt like Asher had been pushed through all five stages of grief as Chardy spoke. Something about it really dug deep into his chest and *ached* . His hands shook as he wrapped his arms around himself and tears welled in his eyes.

"Thanks, Chardy-... I- you're a really nice dude, ya know that…?" He mumbled, his voice cracking a little as a single tear slid down his cheek.

He stiffened as Chardy hugged him tightly, but he soon melted into the warmth of his friend as he hugged him tightly back.

“Thank *you* … and I’m serious about my offer, okay..? I don’t care if it’s four in the morning and you’re bleeding everywhere- *come get me* … if it’s two p.m and you just aren’t feeling great, we can chat about it for however long you want… sound good..?” Chardy said softly, and Asher just nodded a tiny bit in response.

“Okay… I- I will…” He whispered.

“Promise…?” Chardy pressed, and Asher slumped further into him.

“I promise…” He quietly confirmed.

Like a moth to a flame

Chapter Summary

> Very long chapter this time, a lot happened but we got a bit of angst, a bit of fluff, some well-deserved comfort and a lot of pain. Little trigger warning for lots of mentioned SH/past issues with that kind of thing as well as mentioned current issues, manipulation and mentioned past abuse, that type of stuff.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They stayed out for a while longer before going home that night. The rest of the weekend passed by normally, and that Monday he headed to the street corner he'd told Burton to have him picked up at. It was a few blocks away from where he lived, surrounded by a few apartment buildings to sort of throw Mr. Burton off.

He went to help him in his office after being picked up by an all black SUV, being driven by a man in a nice tuxedo. The drive was fine, he tried making some light smalltalk with the driver but it didn't go far.

They pulled up to Burtons big fancy work/home building, and after being given a brief tour he had been neglected during the party, he just went to work with Mr. Burton in his office.

Around noon however, Asher was having a hard time focusing due to hunger. He hadn't eaten in about twenty-four hours now, maybe more- and Burton quickly picked up on this.

"Come on, kid- let's take a breather." The man mumbled as he lifted himself out of his black office chair, the old thing creaked as he used the armrests to lift himself up.

"O-okay- sorry, sir-" Asher mumbled as he stood up as well. He got an office chair too- he was settled at a smaller desk right next to Burtons, but as of right now he was mainly just watching Burton and listening to what he told him about the work he was doing.

He followed silently as Burton led him out to the same balcony they had gone to at the party. It looked different now, during the day- but

it was still a nice view of the garden.

Burton pulled out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter as he had that night, and he was quick to offer Asher one.

Asher accepted it and lit it once Burton was done lighting his own. He didn't like how it felt to smoke it, and he did cough again after the first drag- but for the rest of the day he was able to focus, and he quit feeling so hungry.

So, that became a normal habit. He worked with Burton, occasionally recording conversations he thought might be important, and he got to smoke usually once a day when he worked with Burton. Eventually the man had even started giving him his own packs to take home- it was hard to keep a secret, though- so he'd started smoking up on the roof of the building when no one was there to see him go up there.

He had kept up on his promise, too- he talked to Chardy more whenever he was feeling like shit. Sometimes he'd go to Lance too, but usually for the less serious stuff so that he and Daniel thought he was doing better.

Months passed like that, and he could honestly say he was starting to do a little better. He still didn't have any special ability, but he was content doing his training with Daniel, then with Burton, then having late night talks with either Chardy or Lance.

One day though, he thought Lance was out doing something and no one else was around, so he went up to the roof to smoke. Unfortunately, he was wrong- when he was up there and about halfway through his cigarette, when he suddenly heard the door to the roof open and shut. He'd just taken a long inhale and knew if he blew out the smoke now, it would be far too easy to see due to the surprising lack of wind at the moment.

He quickly stood up and turned around, hiding the cigarette behind his back. Lance and Daniel had both stepped onto the roof, and both looked stunned to see Asher there.

"What on earth are you doing up here??" Lance asked quickly, walking closer to him.

"Oh uh- nothing-" Asher muttered, trying to let out as little air as possible, which made his voice sound very tight and slightly high-

pitched.

“What’s wrong? Why are you talking funny?” Lance asked suspiciously as Daniel went to stand next to him.

“What- what do ya mean?” Asher asked, trying not to let out the cough that was building up from holding the smoke in his lungs for so long. He was starting to get light-headed from not breathing.

“Asher, are you up here smoking??” Daniel suddenly asked, and then the dam broke. He wheezed as he tried to catch his breath before he passed out, and when he started coughing he damn near fell to the ground as his vision started to blur. He felt Lance grab him, and he thought it was to hold him upright until he felt his arm being yanked around and the cigarette grabbed from his hand.

“What the fuck?? Why do you have this?!” Lance demanded, instantly sounding livid. Asher yanked away from him, composing himself a little as he stepped back, and precariously close to the edge of the rooftop.

“Look it’s not- I just-” He stammered, and Lance instantly spun into a lecture about how dangerous and how horrible smoking was. He wished he could say he heard what Lance said, but all he paid attention to was the almost predatory way Lance took an angry step closer to him.

He tried to step back again, but he felt his heart drop as he realized that step was directly off of the roof, and before he knew it he was plummeting downwards.

He was pretty sure he heard Lance shout something, but as he spread his wings out all he heard was air rushing around him.

During the initial fall, all he could think about was stabilizing himself, and not plummeting to his death. He hardly even had time to think of how fucking stupid it was that there were no railings on the roof.

It hurt a little to suddenly catch his weight on his frail wings, but he’d learned to fly years ago- he flapped heavily to bring himself back up towards the roof, only to see Daniel about to jump off after him.

Seeing that Asher was no longer falling, Daniel reached out and grabbed his arm, pulling him quickly, and a little roughly, back onto solid ground.

“Gods- are you okay??” Daniel asked in a frantic tone as he looked him over, his hands firm and heavy on Asher's shoulders.

“I’m- I’m fine-” Asher mumbled.

“You can fucking *fly* ??” Lance demanded as he nudged Daniel away and hugged Asher, tugging him farther away from the edge of the building. Asher didn’t hug him back, though. Instead he pushed away from him as soon as it was safe to do so.

“Don’t touch me! Yes, I can fucking fly. If you’d stuck around you would’ve known that!” He snapped, raising his voice as he swiftly headed towards the door.

“Asher, wait-” Daniel called as he followed him and Lance.

“Stop turning everything back around to that! We need to have a fucking conversation, don’t just walk away! Again!” Lance shouted after him.

He went back inside and slammed the door shut, basically flying down the stairs as he heard the door open behind him again.

“Asher!” Lance yelled. He ran down the steps, struggling not to trip over himself as he jumped down them two or three at a time. When he made it back down to the floor they all lived on, he sprinted down the hall and into his room, managing to lock the door just as Lance was leaving the stairwell.

Adrenaline still coursing through his veins, he panted as he stumbled to sit on the edge of his bed. He couldn’t seem to catch his breath, though- all he could hear was blood rushing through his body and very faint knocking at his door. His heart started beating uncomfortably fast- it felt like it was going to burst out of his chest as his vision started to develop black spots. It almost felt like a panic attack, but he wasn’t scared, he just couldn’t ***breathe*** .

He closed his eyes and clutched his chest, and in the next moment he opened them again to find that he was on the floor. His head was absolutely *pounding* now, and the now much louder knocking wasn’t helping.

“Asher! What happened?? Open the door!” Lance shouted from the other side. He looked around in confusion- he was just on the floor next to his bed, but he was leaning back against the nightstand. He must’ve passed out and hit his head or something- that certainly

wasn't something he wanted to go through again.

"I- I'm fine! Lea- leave me alone-" He tried to yell, but he couldn't get his voice to be as strong as he would've hoped.

"What was that noise??" Lance demanded.

"I just- I fell! Go away-!" Asher started to sound as annoyed as he felt as he lifted himself up onto the bed again.

He was still trembling and felt very faint, but he was determined to not pass out again. He just kept taking deep, long breaths that still just didn't quite feel like he was getting enough oxygen somehow.

"No! We need to talk-!" Lance yelled back, but a moment later he heard Daniel say something quietly to Lance. He didn't have it in him to try to listen, so he just sat there in silence until he heard both sets of footsteps walking back down the hallway.

Calypso nudged his hand a little from where it was set on the bed, causing him to jump. He hadn't even realized she was there until just then. She looked up at him and chittered softly.

"Leave me alone…" He grumbled as he practically fell over onto his side and clutched one of the pillows on his bed tightly to his chest, burying his face into it.

He wasn't bothered for the rest of the day- or maybe he was and just slept through it, since he barely moved over the course of several hours and didn't remember most of it.

Late that night, he couldn't fall asleep and was starting to feel particularly depressed. Usually he would go talk to Chardy- especially since Lance didn't typically stay the night here- but he just didn't want to bother his friend today.

He stood up and stumbled out of his room, his mind in a fog as he turned and went right into Lance's room.

It was pitch black in the room since the window was covered, blocking what little moonlight might've made it through the clouds. He scanned over the room and spotted Lance because of his softly glowing wings. Luckily he seemed to be asleep, sprawled out on the bed. Tears welled in Asher's eyes as he quietly stepped over to him, watching his brother sleep for a moment.

Hesitantly, he reached out to stroke one of his warm wings. His hand jerked back and his eyes widened as he felt sparks of pain shoot through his hand.

Lance's wing *burned* him.

Lance burned him.

Tears welled in his eyes and began to slip down his cheeks as he looked over his hand- but it was too dark to see if there was any real damage. Almost as if he didn't believe the still warm pain blossoming on his skin, he reached out and lightly petted Lance's wing again.

Expecting the pain this time, he didn't move back when it hurt. At first it wasn't too bad- just the warmth from if you put your hands too close to something like a fire. But as he kept stroking, the pain grew- it hurt, it *ached,* but it was like he was in some kind of trance and couldn't stop. Now it felt like he was sticking his hand directly into a fire with every touch- once it got too overwhelming, he finally pulled his hand away. He was trembling as he quickly stepped back out of the room.

Lance didn't trust him. He probably thought he was *crazy* . Of course he did- Asher was crazy. He'd tried to kill himself, he pulled a knife on Daniel, then on Lance- Lance had *no reason* to trust him.

No one had any reason to trust him.

Dammit, Asher was supposed to *know better* than to do something like that. He could practically hear his dads voice shouting at him for being stupid, for doing the wrong thing. It didn't even really matter what he did, everything that he did was just *wrong* .

He locked himself in his room and curled up on the floor, his hands clutching his head as a small sob shook through him.

He was *stupid* . That's why no one stuck around. That's why his mom died, it's why his dad hated him, it's why Lance didn't trust him.

He sobbed on the floor until he eventually passed out.

Over the course of the next few weeks, he tried to get closer to Lance. It was like an obsession- in between all of the other things he had to do, he learned Lance's schedule and went out of his way to just be in whatever room Lance was in.

He couldn't use his left hand for a bit though- it had been burned pretty badly. Whenever he was asked about it, he just said that he set his hand on the stove when it was still hot by mistake.

He and Lance never ended up having that talk they were supposed to- in fact, sometimes it felt like Lance was avoiding him despite Asher doing his best to follow him around like a lost dog.

One morning after breakfast, which Asher had reluctantly eaten for fear of passing out again, he waited for Lance to finish up and leave the dining table to quickly get up and follow him.

"Hey- Lance-" He said quickly, basically tripping over himself to keep up.

"What?" Lance asked, sounding mildly annoyed.

"I- I was wondering if- maybe you wanted to do something today. There's a really cool movie I saw in theaters and I was just thinking that maybe–" He started to ask, but Lance started walking again.

"Sorry, can't tonight. Got plans with Dexter." Lance muttered. Asher was quick to keep following him.

"Oh- okay- well- what about tomorrow? I go to Burtons in the morning and afternoon, but–" Asher tried again, but was once again cut off.

"I'm busy most nights this week. Sorry." Lance said with a sigh and stepped into his room, where Asher paused outside as he shut the door.

Asher's shoulders slumped as he just stared at the closed wooden door, tears welling in his eyes.
It was too late. He pushed Lance away too hard this time, and now he'd lost his brother. He wrapped his arms around himself, tucking his wings in close and started heading to his room- but Daniel must've spotted him, because he couldn't even shut the door before the man appeared there.

"Hey, Asher- are you alright?" He asked softly as Asher tried to blink away the tears.

"Yeah I'm-..." He thought about it for a moment. Instinctively, he wanted to lie- to tell Daniel that he was fine. But when he really thought it over, he didn't really have a *reason* to lie about this. He was

upset- Chardy kept telling him it was okay to be upset- maybe he could test that. "... I- I don't think Lance likes me anymore- I- I know I was mad at him but-.... I guess I didn't think he'd want to cut me off again… He won't even *look* at me, Dan-... I didn't mean to make him hate me again…" Asher mumbled, looking at the ground.

Daniel watched him with a sympathetic expression before gently pulling him into a hug. Asher quickly hugged him back.

"Your brother does *not* hate you… He can be temperamental sometimes, sure- think of it like how you feel when you lash out- it's hard to control, you know..? And then you feel bad about it after- and sometimes in that state of feeling so miserable, it can be hard to address the person you've hurt… let me talk to him, and give him some time to cool off, okay..?" Daniel said softly.

"O-okay-.... thanks…" Asher mumbled and slowly let go of Daniel, who patted him on the shoulder with a kind smile before he walked back to Lance's room.

Asher just shut his door and curled up in bed to wait for anything to happen. He was left alone until maybe five or six p.m when there was a soft knock on his door.

"Come in-" He called- he was sitting on his bed just scrolling through his phone. He looked up to see Lance open the door- he had an odd expression, almost like he was guilty but also annoyed.

"Hey, Asher. What uh- what time was that movie you wanted to go see?" Lance mumbled.

"Oh- um- I think around eight p.m-" Asher replied, trying to hide his overeager excitement.

"Okay- well- I can go, but only if Dexter can come too- I promised him we'd hang out, and he's having a bit of a rough time at the moment-" Lance explained. Asher paused for a moment, feeling his smile begin to fade a little. He hadn't seen Dexter in months, maybe even a year now- he *really* didn't want to see him, but he did want to spend time with his brother.

"... Well- okay-" He relented.

"Okay?" Lance asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I mean- that's fine- it- I'll get ready to go soon-" Asher stammered.

"... Alright. I'll drive us, he's gonna meet us there-" Lance replied, slipping out of the room. Asher sighed and quickly went about getting ready, making sure to wear clothes that covered essentially every part of his skin except for his face and hands. He wore a big gray turtleneck sweater and black cargo pants, which he used to hide stuff like bandages and little tools or trinkets he liked to carry around. He liked to be prepared, so he had stuff like a miniature hammer and a small pair of pliers just in case, and he found that it was easier to go out in public with small comfort items that he liked to fidget with. At the moment, that was a little rusty, faded-golden skeleton key he'd found a few weeks ago.

When he was ready, he went to wait for Lance by the elevator.

Lance joined him a few moments later, checking his phone as he headed over. He was wearing just a black shirt and jeans.

"Ready?" Lance asked, finally slipping the phone into his pocket.

"Mhm-" Asher said with a nod, stepping into the elevator.

The rest of the evening was a little uncomfortable. When they got to the theater, Dexter met them in the lobby- he kept giving Asher this eerie, angry look that made his blood run cold. Lance didn't seem to notice, though- he just got their tickets and some popcorn.

Once they were in their seats, Asher felt a little better- Lance was between him and Dexter so it was almost easy to pretend he just wasn't there at all.

He quite enjoyed watching the movie- it was some alien invasion movie where the protagonist had to protect his family. It more than likely wasn't something that anyone Asher's age should be watching, but too late now.

At the very end it was going over some sentimental stuff about how they all moved on from the situation and all that, and during this Lance seemed to get a little emotional. He wrapped an arm around Asher, then one of his wings. It felt like a nice gesture, until he felt the *burning* along his back, left shoulder and arm, and everywhere else the wing got too close to.

He cringed a little but didn't let his growing discomfort and pain become too obvious. He just leaned into Lance and tried to focus on the movie, even as the burning sensation along basically the entire left side of his body and back only increased to agony, causing tears to

spring to his eyes.

Finally, *finally* , when the movie was over Lance moved and stood up. He still felt uncomfortably hot, and now it hurt to move, but that's okay. Lance wasn't angry at him, at least at the moment- he'd go through this pain every day if it meant he got to spend time with Lance like this.

The three of them then walked out of the theater, and Asher had to squint a little at the bright lights in the lobby area.

"Alright, I'm gonna run to the bathroom. You two stay here-" Lance said as he strolled off. Asher stiffened a little and sort of glanced sideways at Dexter, who glared back at him.

"So, finally decided to come back into town when it was convenient for you, huh? Why haven't you been answering my texts?" Dexter demanded in a quiet voice so no one around would hear.

"I- I blocked your number-" Asher mumbled, trying to keep his voice and his thoughts firm. He felt odd, though- like he should *really* be listening to Dexter.

"You should unblock me, then. It's not fair for you to just cut me off because I was going through a rough time- you're being selfish again." Dexter hissed, his bright orange fox tail lashing out behind him.

Again, he felt that odd sensation. It was like something in the back of his mind was urging him to do what Dexter said, but it wasn't like a gut feeling- it was like another voice had been added into his mind other than his own, convincing, pleading, *manipulating* .

"Okay, Dex. I'll think about it." Asher mumbled back, making his tone sound like he was giving in and would do what Dexter said. He had absolutely no intentions of unblocking Dexter's number, but at least Dexter seemed content with his response.

A moment later, Lance came back over to them.

"Okay, I guess I'd better bring Asher back-" He said to Dexter, who smiled a bit.

"Oh, speaking of- where is the kid staying?" Dexter asked.

"With Daniel, for the time being-" Lance replied as he headed for the door. Asher followed silently, staring at the ground as he tried not to

think about how much walking hurt at the moment.

Once he was in the car with Lance and Dexter had walked off, he relaxed back into his seat. This was an unfortunate decision, however, as tears instantly sprung to his eyes. He tried not to make any kind of pained noise as he shifted away from the back of the seat, sitting now quite tense in the front passenger seat of Lance's car.

Lance gave him an odd look and seemed like he was going to ask something, but Asher quickly spoke before he could.

"So- how much does Dexter know?" He asked softly.

"Well, not a lot- He thinks that Daniel is a professor at my college I've grown close with. He doesn't know anything about the missions or anything like that, but he knows I've got some fire control and such- why?" Lance answered.

"Just curious-" Asher mumbled with a shrug.

"... Okay-" Lance sighed.

The rest of the car ride after that was quiet until they got home. As they got out and headed into the tall building, Lance glanced at Asher.

"Do- do you wanna play cards or something? I could teach you how to play poker if we can get some other people to join-" Lance suggested. Asher instantly lit up, almost forgetting about needing to take care of his still burning wounds.

"Oh, yes please- I don't really know how to play any card games like that. I'm sure Chardy would be up and able to play-" Asher replied happily. Lance smiled a bit, and moments later they were up on the floor they all lived on.

"Okay, go get Chardy- I'll see if anyone else wants to play too. Daniel's probably already in bed, though- he has somewhere to go really early in the morning-" Lance said as he stepped out of the elevator.

"Okay-" Asher said after a second of hesitation. He'd really rather bandage up his burns before sitting to play card games, but he couldn't let this opportunity slip from him.

He practically skipped over to Chardy's room and knocked softly on the door.

“Hang on-” Chardy called, and a moment later he opened the door. He looked like he’d been laying in bed, his hair was a little messy and he was in a sweater and loose sweatpants. He was usually quite put together and wore a ton of button ups, so it almost felt odd to see him in such a casual state, but at the same time it was strangely nice too. Maybe just knowing Chardy had become comfortable enough with Asher to not feel the need to be so well put together around him, but the more he thought about it the more stupid that felt.

“Hey, what’s up?” Chardy asked cheerily.

“Me and Lance were gonna play some card games- he’s going to teach me how to play poker. Want to join us-?” Asher asked happily.

“Sure! I’m glad you and Lance are spending time together-” Chardy replied softly and took Asher’s hand. He suddenly stiffened and watched Asher with an almost scared looking expression.

“What? What did you see-?” Asher asked quickly.

“Oh, no Asher- don’t worry about it- it- it’s probably not accurate anyways-” Chardy mumbled.

“What was it?” Asher pressed, and Chardy sighed, seeming reluctant.

“It… was you, later tonight, opening up your window and-... ‘falling’ out…” Chardy whispered, glancing down the hall to make sure no one else was listening. Asher paled a little- he hadn’t been intending on doing anything, in fact he was in a pretty good mood at the moment- even though he hadn’t been able to smoke in a few days now.

“... I- I’m not- I swear, today’s a good day- I won’t-” Asher stammered a little.

“... It- I believe you, but-... maybe I could stay the night in your room? Just like a sleepover, but it’ll give me peace of mind-” Chardy offered, forcing a little smile.

“Okay- sure-” Asher gave a small, tight smile back and turned to walk down the hall. Chardy followed him, still holding onto his hand quite tightly.

They got set up on the floor around the coffee table, and a bit later Lance came back with Amelia.

Every time Asher first saw her out of the corner of his eye, his heart

would skip a beat- she looked so much like his mom when he couldn't fully focus his vision on her. Of course, upon closer look they really didn't seem all that much alike- but their hair was the same, eyes were similar, and if Asher was being honest with himself, he was almost starting to *forget* how his mother looked. He couldn't fully picture every intricate detail of her face, her smile, the way her hair fell when she cooked- it *terrified* him, so he tried not to think about it.

It was harder now, though- he'd been tuning out the world less and less lately. Daniel said it was something to do with being more comfortable around everyone here, which he supposed could make some sense- even though he didn't really know Victor or Amelia all that well yet.

They all played cards for the rest of the night, and everyone was quite nice in teaching him. He was uncomfortable the entire time, though- he couldn't really sit back against any furniture without blistering pain, but sitting so rigid just on the floor made his spine hurt, which caused his head to hurt.

He could hide his discomfort, though- Lance seemed so happy that they were all together having a good time. He didn't want to ruin it by being selfish.

It was around two in the morning, and they were halfway through another game Asher had forgotten the name of. He'd been eliminated earlier on, though- so at the moment he was watching Amelia, Lance, and Victor *viciously* try to beat each other- Chardy had sat that round out, but was sitting next to Asher and commenting on the gameplay to give Asher a better idea of what was going on.

At some point, Asher's ears started ringing- he felt like he was in a dazed state, where he was looking around and everything had a bit of a blurry effect to it. It all felt too *real* as well, like he'd just snapped out of an episode of blocking out his mind.

He kept looking around as black spots began to dance around his vision, and the next thing he knew he'd blacked out again.

All he really registered was panic- he didn't want to worry anyone around him, so the second he was conscious he jolted up and tried to make his quick tone sound as normal as possible.

"I'm fine-!" He shouted. He was on the floor still, roughly where he was before- but he'd definitely been laying down a second ago. Everyone was watching him with concern and Chardy set a hand on

his shoulder- luckily the uninjured one. Regardless though, his whole body *ached* from being basically dropped on the floor- it was quickly becoming too much to bear now.

“Asher- what happened-? You just fell over- are you okay??” Chardy asked with worry.

“I- I’m fine- I just- I’m really tired, I might have to call it a night-” He mumbled, looking at the ground.

“I don’t know kid, that was really sudden-” Lance sounded unsure.

“I’m fine, Lan- just really tired- it didn’t hit me til right now-” Asher insisted as he stood up. He quickly realized that this was a mistake, as his head instantly *pounded* like his brain was trying to escape his skull, and his vision nearly whited out for a second.

But he was committed now, so he began shakily walking to his room. Chardy quickly got up and followed him, holding onto his arm. He winced, his chest tightening from the pain that blossomed as Chardy touched his injuries- luckily no one but Chardy seemed to notice.

As soon as they were back in Asher’s room, Chardy shut the door and turned to him.

“You’re hurt. What happened??” He sounded worried.

“I- I’m fine, Char- just–” Asher started, but was cut off.

“No- nope, Asher- you’re supposed to tell me the things you don’t want Lance to know- so tell me, and show me so I can fix it up-” Chardy said firmly. Asher sighed and slumped into his bed, wincing a little.

“... Lance-... his wings burned me- they-... they’ve never done that before…” Asher whispered, his voice suddenly becoming dry and crackly.

“... Oh- did- did you not tell him..?” Chardy asked softly.

“No-... that’s why the burns are so bad- I *can’t* tell him, Chardy- please don’t tell him- if he *knows* that no part of him trusts me then he’ll want to cut me off again and I- I can’t-...” Asher trailed off, his voice becoming somewhat panicked.

“Or maybe he’d want to grow closer with you after realizing the

distance…?" Chardy suggested as he sat next to Asher.

"I doubt it… it's like- like a trust your instincts sort of thing, I'm sure- but I- I would *never* hurt him-..." Asher mumbled, but in his mind he thought back to when he'd pulled out his knife on Daniel, then Lance as well.

"Well I-... I wouldn't mean to-.... Oh god, Chardy I- he doesn't trust me for good reason- I- shit-" Tears welled in his eyes and his hands shook.

"Hey, hey- stop all that…" Chardy whispered as he shifted to loosely hug Asher, trying not to touch anywhere that might be burned, since he couldn't tell exactly what was or wasn't yet.
Asher hugged him tightly back, burying his face in Chardy's shoulder. Chardy was still quite small for most guys his age, but he was still bigger than Asher by a good bit, so his hugs felt very nice and comforting.

"You've just grown apart a little, that's all… I'm not gonna tell Lance, but I *really* think that you should tell him… he's your brother, he loves you even if there's issues that come up… ya know, none of us even knew he was adopted for the longest time… we all assumed you were biological siblings, because he *never* referred to you as anything other than his little brother…" Chardy said gently. Asher shifted a little to look up at him, still trying not to cry.

"He-... he talked about me…?" Asher asked quietly.

"Mhm… not- a lot to me, I mean- we're friends, but I'm not close with him like Victor and Amelia are… but he'd say things sometimes- like if we made your favorite meal for dinner, or your favorite things were brought up in conversation- just little comments here and there…" Chardy answered.

"Oh…" Asher whispered and hugged Chardy a bit tighter.

"Mhm… so don't- don't get me wrong, he's done things that put him in the wrong, but he didn't really-... he didn't think he was abandoning you when he left, even though by definition he kinda did… It's not fun to be told you're in the wrong by someone you think highly of, right..?" Asher was listening to Chardy, honestly- but his comforting voice was also making him feel a little drowsy- plus he was still sort of out of it from passing out earlier.

"Mhm…" He murmured.

“Okay, now let’s get those burns taken care of- I’ll go grab some burn cream and bandages, but I’ll be super discreet- stay put, and stay awake, alright?” Chardy said sweetly as he pulled away from Asher and stood back up.

“Okay…” Asher sighed and straightened up a bit, watching as Chardy slipped out of the room and quietly shut the door behind himself.

It was a good five minutes before Chardy came back, and it gave Asher quite a bit of time to think. His thoughts were sporadic, though, and he wished he had a cigarette. His mind felt easier to navigate through when he had that nice buzz feeling he usually had for the rest of the day after smoking.

When Chardy finally did come back, he set everything up and sat behind Asher. Asher had to take his shirt off for Chardy to be able to do anything, which was clearly quite uncomfortable- it became even more obvious how malnurtured he was, and all the scars on his arms were visible- including the more recent ones from just a few nights ago.

Chardy seemed to sense his discomfort, though, as he’d rolled up his sleeves to his elbows. When he moved his arms within Asher’s sight, Asher could see the somewhat faded scars from Chardy’s struggles- even though it sort of made his chest hurt to think of his friend, alone and bleeding out on the floor as he himself had, it was also oddly comforting to share the same pains with someone.

He barely even noticed the pain of the burn cream or bandages, he just kept thinking about how grateful he was for everything Chardy was doing for him.

“Alright, all done- you can put your shirt back on-” Chardy said softly, patting his uninjured shoulder a bit.

“Thank you, Char… I mean- *really* , thank you- I’m so lucky I have you as a friend…” Asher said softly as he put his shirt back on, shifting on the bed to face Chardy once he was done.

Chardy just gave him a sad little smile, tilting his head a little to the side.

“Of course, Asher… I hope someday you find peace within yourself like I have… I hope it’s someday soon, so you can start living your life instead of surviving it…” Chardy replied.

“I like listening to you talk…” Asher mumbled without really thinking.

“Well- thank you… sometimes I worry you aren’t really listening- you’ve got a sort of distant look sometimes…” Chardy murmured.

“I am- I don’t- I don’t always remember well, but I know how I feel when I listen to you… But- I’m tired now, can I go to sleep..?” Asher asked.

“Of course, Asher- is it alright if I stay on your bed or would you rather I sleep on the floor?”

“Oh- right- uhh- you can stay on the bed- just- be careful in case Calypso is hiding somewhere in the blankets-” Asher replied and laid down on his side. He laid on his right side since it hardly had any burns, but it meant that he was facing away from Chardy. Luckily it didn’t seem to bother him much, as Chardy shifted a little to get comfortable.

It always took Asher a long time to fall asleep, but he was usually quite still during the process. Chardy had still been awake too, occasionally moving around a bit- at some point when he seemed to think Asher was asleep, he carefully hugged him.

Asher still didn’t move or react, but it felt nice- he sort of wanted to hug Chardy back, but he didn’t want to make it awkward by revealing that he was, in fact, still awake.

It surprisingly didn’t take him much longer to fall asleep after that.

Chapter End Notes

> I really hope people were able to pick up on some of the chemistry I tried to have with Chardy, he's by far my favorite side character and just such a cute wholesome little guy :')
> ALSO this is officially halfway through everything I have written now! I'm going to try and post a very big chunk of what's left tomorrow because I won't be able to post anything on Sunday and potentially Monday as well

Poor unfortunate souls

Chapter Summary

> One of my other favorite characters gets to show up now :D
> So anyways big trigger warning for the human experimentation, it doesn't go into crazy heavy detail just yet, but it will, and the more you think about it the more messed up it gets

Things carried on quite normally after that. He had a near constant on-and-off type relationship with Lance, where sometimes they would be close and spend time together, and other times they would be fighting.

He and Chardy still spent quite a lot of time together, but even that felt pretty inconsistent because of clashing schedules and Asher having been asked to work more with Burton.

He felt himself starting to grow a little closer with the others too- he wasn't *that* close with them, but would probably consider them friends. He didn't have to see Dexter too often, luckily- but when he did see him it was always a horrible experience.

He also got to spend more time with Daniel now- they'd made it a bit of a tradition to go get ice cream together once a week. He didn't realize it at the time, but in hindsight it might've been just to get the kid to eat something- which just about everyone had started caring about all of the sudden.

Quite a few months passed, he was sixteen now and it was about the dead of winter- Lance had turned twenty-two, Chardy was almost nineteen- obviously everyone was growing up.

Asher went and stood on the street corner for Burton's driver to come get him on this Monday morning as he usually did. He slipped into the passenger seat- he wasn't *close* with the driver or anything, but they chatted from time to time. Asher had felt himself becoming less and less introverted- it wasn't that he particularly *liked* talking to people or anything, but he liked the benefits he'd gain long term by just making little smalltalk and getting people to trust or like him, even though he was entirely untrustable and unlikeable.

He noticed after a few minutes however that they were going a completely different direction than Burton's house. Looking out the window, he barely recognized where they were going- but it seemed to be in the general direction to leave the main city.

“Uhh- where are we going?” He asked after a moment.

“Ah, Mr. Burton requested you to go specifically to his secondary house. He has a more personal project he was hoping to share with you.” The driver answered.

“Oh- okay-” Asher leaned against the door and looked out the window.

They did end up leaving town- it was a considerably longer drive out there. Once they completely left the concrete jungle behind, they were surrounded by hills and trees with occasional houses scattered throughout. The houses were all clearly owned by rich people, as they were all big and quite fancy.

He jumped a little as he felt his phone buzz in his pocket. Pulling it out, he read a text from Daniel.

“Where are you going?”

Oh, right- he’d forgotten that everyone had apps on their phones now for tracking purposes. Asher hadn’t gone on any official missions, but Daniel had him download the app anyways.

“Burton's house. Some kind of prsnl project, prob cant text through the day” He texted back.

He silenced his phone after that and put it back in his pocket. He still brought a little audio recording device with him, but he was rarely ever around for any important enough conversations to bother using it.

When they got there, Asher was impressed, but not surprised at how fancy the place was. It was relatively similar to his house in the city- maybe a tiny bit smaller though and with more of a blue color pallet.

It was two stories with white trims and a dark gray roof, the front yard was massive and filled with intricate rose bushes cut to look like various animals or objects.

The driveway was long, and the garage was a whole separate building

with three expensive cars already in there. The driver parked next to a red sports car and got out, opening the door for Asher.

“Here we are, sir. I shall walk you inside to Mr. Burton.” The man said as Asher got out.

“Okay-” Asher looked around, committing every detail he thought relevant to his memory as they headed up to the house.

Heading in through the large white double doors at the front, they entered a very fancy foyer. The driver clicked on a little intercom thing on the wall, and there was a soft ding through the speaker.

“Mr. Burton to the foyer please, Sir Asher has arrived.” The driver said before clicking the button again.

Moments later, Mr. Burton walked quickly out from one of the hallways.

“Ah, welcome boy. Come along, we must speak privately.” Burton seemed oddly excited as Asher walked over to meet him halfway.

“Alright, what is it?” He asked, and they both began walking down a different hall. He noticed the driver slipping back out of the front door and supposedly leaving.

Burton led him into an office type room at the end of a hall on the first floor. He sat in his nice office chair and gestured for Asher to sit in a nice little guest chair he had across from him at the desk. Asher very discreetly hit the record button on the little speaker he had in his pocket. It would automatically send the conversation to Daniel- not quite in real time but with a few minute delay. Daniel didn’t say it, but Asher was sure that he did that just in case he didn’t make it back to deliver the audio himself.

“Alright, now for this I need your *absolute* secrecy. Do you understand? It is my understanding that your relationship with your family is not good, so I should assume you won’t be telling any of them, hm? Because I need to warn you now that if *one word* of this gets out to *anyone* , you are the first and only other person to know outside of those involved. If someone finds out about this, you’re as good as dead.” Burton’s tone became much darker at the end. Asher quickly nodded.

“Yes, sir- I barely even speak to my brother or my father. I swear, I won’t tell a soul-” Asher said in the most genuine tone he could.

“Good. Now, I’m not sure if you’re aware or not, given your species, but some more unique ones such as yours can have specific… *abilities* .” Burton mumbled, and Asher had to think for a second to decide just how much to say.

“Ah, yes- I know some about that- I had an old childhood friend who was discovered to have fire related abilities. I don’t believe I have any, however-” He responded.

“Mhm. Well, I *found* a few of them some time ago. I’ve been keeping them here, and doing research on them. In my most recent breakthrough, I discovered that I could physically alter them to be *superweapons* .” Burton said, a maniacal grin spreading across his wrinkled face. Despite instantly feeling nauseous, Asher smirked a little and kept his cool.

“What exactly does that mean?” Asher asked.

“Well, it’d be easier to show you. But when he started out, he was some kind of odd bird- his special ability was strange, it took a while to understand. Essentially he could shift the mood in the room, he could alter how people thought through chemicals in their brains somehow. Now, he can still do that mind you- with much more *deadly* accuracy, targeting specific people. He can drive you insane, you know- if I left someone alone with them he’d turn their brain inside out. Now, the *physical* aspect is where I’ve truly outdone myself. I removed the wings and gave him these appendages- they might be some form of dark matter, quite frankly- I killed the scientist who did it for me. Picture octopus limbs without the suckers, but they can regrow or even retract- they can also harden and the point will be sharper than any blade. If I can recreate this in a more stable environment, I could *sell* them for *trillions* . A monster you’d need an army to kill!” Burton explained with growing excitement and pride. Deep down, Asher was *horrified* . Everything he’d just heard was absolutely diabolical and he didn’t know what to say or how to feel. Well, he didn’t know how to *actually* feel, but he knew exactly what to do to keep this running smoothly.

He nodded, intentionally making himself look deep in thought.

“I see, was it just the one? What happened to the others-? Do you think you’ll be able to train this one well enough to be worth selling, or was it the practice subject?” He asked.

“I like the way you think, kid. At the moment we’re at a bit of a

standstill- he only listens to me if there's pain involved for his disobedience. The other subjects didn't make it past the testing phase, but I do believe that I'd be able to recreate this on someone younger- raise them up as my own. Come, let's meet him." Burton smirked and stood up. Asher stood as well and followed him back out of the room, and into another door. This door led to a long dim hallway, and at the end was a single heavy metal door that needed a keycard to open.

Burton opened it to reveal an elevator, which they both got into. It swiftly brought them down, which made Asher's stomach feel funny as it usually did. He felt a little faint, but did his best to hide it as the elevator slowed and let them both out.

It was white and clean like a hospital down there- there was a pretty wide hallway that was long enough for three rooms on each side of it, so six doors total. All of these doors were reinforced metal as well, and also needed keycards.

Burton led him to the first room and opened the door- inside was a little darker. It was a large closet sized room with another door right in front of the first, and a long window next to it with an equally long desk below. On the desk were some papers and files, a computer, a bottle of whiskey, and two chairs in front. There was also something roughly the size and shape of a keyboard for a computer, but it had a ton of buttons and dials on it unlike any computer he'd ever seen. Every one had symbols on it that he didn't understand.

Inside the window was a very dark room, but through the darkness he could make out vague shapes. It looked like a decent sized room with a bed, and maybe a desk or table of some sort with one single chair to match.

It seemed almost like one of those police interrogation rooms, though he wasn't sure if the viewing window was a one sided mirror or just regular glass.

"This is the observation room. After he turned sixteen I had to do all of my research from here. Are you ready to see him?" Burton asked as he sat in one of the chairs. Asher just nodded, his throat suddenly feeling quite dry.

Burton turned up one of the dials, which turned up the light in the room to be as bright as the little one they were in. Asher jumped back in surprise as a figure appeared directly in front of the glass.

"Jesus- shit-" He yelped as he jumped back, then paused, looking over

the figure. He looked like a person at first glance, just a teenager around Asher's age- maybe a little older. He had long dark hair that desperately needed any kind of cut or brush. He had almost gray looking eyes, and his pale skin had this sort of blue tint to it. He was tall and quite muscular, which felt somewhat odd considering there didn't seem to be anything in the room to exercise with.

Burton laughed at Asher's reaction to the boy before them, a look of shock still plastered across his face.

"Now now, no need to be alarmed. He likes scaring people. As long as you stay behind this glass and that door stays shut, you'll be fine. His mind abilities are unable to breach the materials I used to build this room, and it was all made strong enough that he's unable to physically escape even with the state of his somewhat fluid excess limbs." Burton said, patting Asher on the shoulder.

"If- if you're certain, sir-" Asher mumbled. He felt his phone buzz in his pocket, but luckily the sound was still off.

"Positive. Now, I suppose it's time for this beast to get his breakfast." Burton mumbled.

While the man messed around with a few more dials and switches, Asher took another look at the guy inside the room. His clothes were old and dirty- the outfit looked like prison clothes but in gray instead of orange. He had on a t-shirt and long pants, and a white undershirt with long sleeves so not much of his skin was visible. He also seemed to have what Asher could only describe as a higher tech version of a dog's shock collar, and some sort of strange metal bracelets that looked like shackles without the chains attached. He just glared firmly at Burton- Asher began to question exactly how mind control-proof the glass really was, because looking into that cold stare sent shivers up his spine and made his flesh feel like it was crawling under his skin.

He looked away from his face and instead to his "extra appendages". They were all pitch black in color, they looked almost like solidified shadows. It was fascinating how they moved- none of them were on the ground, and he wasn't doing anything specific with them but it was almost like their idle placement was still in some form of motion. Perhaps it was like breathing, where if you don't think about it it's not always under your direct control. The way they moved was similar to underwater plants, drifting softly in the currents with a light back and forth type of motion.

He looked back at Burton as the man finally pushed a final button, and there was a mechanical sound from inside the room. The man inside snapped his head around to see a tray of something that looked like gray mashed potatoes, and *very* unappetizing.

“What’s that?” Asher asked as he watched the subject go and begin eating the food.

“His meal. I tried raising him like a normal child, for the most part- I don’t want him to be *too* animalistic. But he’s been particularly difficult these last few weeks, so he doesn’t get real food. That stuff has enough nutrients to keep him strong and healthy, but there’s nothing enjoyable about the meal.” Burton replied.

“Ah, I see- and what–” Asher began, but was cut off by the sound of Burton’s phone ringing. The man groaned in exasperation and pulled his phone out of his pocket.

“I have to take this. Don’t touch anything, I’ll be back.” He grumbled as he stepped out of the room.

Asher waited until he heard the door slide shut before quickly pulling out his phone. He watched the subject through the window to make sure he wasn’t watching what Asher did, just in case he and Burton were closer than the man was letting on.

He snapped some quick, slightly blurry pictures of the little room they were in and the room that the subject was in. He also quickly checked the message he’d been sent, which was Daniel texting him.

“What the hell is going on there?” Asher didn’t send a text back, but instead he whispered just loud enough that the recorder in his pocket should be able to hear.

“Daniel, this is *really bad* . I need to help this guy.” By the time he finished speaking, he heard the door slide back open again and Burton stepped inside.

Luckily his phone was already back in his pocket, and he was just sort of watching the subject again, who seems to have just finished eating and was now watching Asher right back.

“My apologies. Now, just sit here quietly whilst I run through a few obedience procedures.” Burton grumbled as he sat down. Asher sat in the chair next to him with a small nod.

“Yes, sir.”

The rest of that day was hellish, to say the least. Asher just had to sit there silently as Burton ordered the subject to do various commands, like to move specific parts of his body or lift different objects that he’d send into the room. If he didn’t comply, Burton would electrocute the shit out of him in two to five second intervals. Asher kept the recorder on basically the entire time, usually forgetting it was even on- but Burton kept explaining exactly what he was doing.

It was getting a little hard to think through the fog of trying to block out the horrendous things he was witnessing, but he was pretty sure anything and everything would be useful information at the moment.

Finally, *finally* , when the day was over he got to climb back into the driver's car and go home.

He pretended to have pleasant smalltalk, pretended like he hadn’t just altered the entire way he thought, pretended he didn’t want to set fire to Mr. Burton’s house.

The second he was out of the car and it drove off, he began basically sprinting back home. He flew into the elevator and jammed his finger so hard into the button to bring him up that it hurt for a while after.

Once the elevator doors opened, he stepped out and turned to go to Daniels floor, but before he could he saw that everyone was already gathered in the living room. Daniel was playing some short snippets of the recordings that Asher had taken, and everyone in the room looked pale and beyond worried.

As soon as they heard the elevator, everyone looked over and Lance ran up to him to hug him.

“Shit, Asher! I told you that man is a fucking *psychopath* -!” Lance shouted. Asher instantly felt annoyed, but he hugged Lance back- honestly he could really use the comfort right now.

“No one said he wasn’t, Lance.” Asher grumbled. He was then bombarded with various worried or even angry questions from everyone until Daniel silenced them all.

“Alright, that’s enough- Asher- are you okay?” Daniel asked softly- Lance backed off too so they could all talk.

“I’m fine, I recorded almost the whole day. Shit- right- I got some pictures too. It- it’s *really* fucked up but I- I don’t want a single one of you telling me I can’t go back. I’m not abandoning this poor dude here- he’s just a kid, no older than Chardy is, I’m sure-” Asher said firmly as he pulled out his phone.

“But- Asher you- this is getting out of hand now, kid-” Lance argued.

“I’m in too deep now- no one else is ever going to get this information out of Burton! He already thinks I’m all on board with this-” Asher argued back as he passed his phone to Daniel with the pictures pulled up.

“Oh my god…” Daniel whispered.

“I’d be just as bad as Burton if I left him there now. I know you heard it, but you didn’t *see* what he did- how much pain that poor boy was put through. I- I’m coming up with a plan, I just- I need some time-” Asher mumbled.

“Okay, what’s the plan?” Daniel asked, which took Asher by surprise. Even Lance didn’t argue, which felt somehow more shocking.

“I need to keep earning Burton's trust in this area specifically- I need his keycard to be able to access the rooms, but he’s too smart for me to just be able to steal it from him. The house is so far away too that I need a solid escape plan- is there a vehicle we’ve got that would blend into a rich people neighborhood? If I can figure out how to get him out of the building then we’d need an escape plan-” Asher replied. “Hang on- he’s been in social isolation being tormented for years. I doubt he’ll just wander out with you, especially without doing something to hurt you-” Lance interjected. As much as Asher wanted to argue, Lance was right. He wouldn’t care much if it was just him getting hurt, but if he couldn’t get this guy out safely then he might be killed or worse- plus he’d be endangering whoever was their getaway driver as well.

“Okay, it’s all just going to have to be up in the air for the time being- if there’s a way I can just talk to him without Burton around…” Asher mumbled. Chardy seemed hesitant for a second, he hadn’t really participated in the conversation yet.

“... Asher- may I speak on something that might be a little bit sensitive?” He asked after a moment. Asher stared at him in confusion, trying to figure out exactly what he wanted to talk about. He trusted Chardy, though- surely it wouldn’t be anything too bad.

"... Sure?" He hesitantly replied.

"Great- so- I know we're all under the impression that you don't have a special ability, at least not yet- but I've been thinking about it for a while and-... I mean, you always seem to get what you want, don't you? You can talk yourself out of damn near anything- even things with people who don't care about you like Burton, who's beyond cruel and wouldn't be above hurting you. I can't be the only one noticing, right?" Chardy asked, looking around. No one replied, all looking somewhat deep in thought, so Chardy continued.

"And on top of that, I'm still unable to read your future or your past. I don't know if there's a way to test or to prove this, but I'm starting to think that your ability is some kind of mental manipulation- not mind control or anything, but almost like your existence is interfering with other's brain waves. I know that doesn't make a lot of sense, but just- when was the last time you *weren't* able to talk yourself out of a situation? I bet if there was someone around with mind control, they wouldn't even be able to fully control you-" Chardy explained.

"... That would make sense. I've never noticed an off feeling when talking to Asher, though- not like I would if someone with mind control was trying something-" Daniel replied.

"I- I don't *feel* like I'm doing anything with powers like that- I just thought I was really good at convincing people that I'm right-" Asher mumbled. Lance stayed quiet as he just stared at the ground.

"This is all quite odd- let me speak with Melinda about it, and do some of my own research. Perhaps we'll be able to come up with a way to test the theory- but for now, Asher I want you to go get some rest-" Daniel instructed. Asher didn't need to be told twice- he basically took off to his room, collapsing into bed.

Vesper

Chapter Summary

> I actually really didn't like this chapter, it felt like my descriptions were all mid and overall it just didn't stand out. But my favorite little guy is here now, so we'll get a little more fluff next chapter :D
> Trigger warnings again for the human experimentation and referenced child abuse/experimentation but its not really as talked about in this chapter

The next few times he worked with Burton were in his office as normal. Everyone at home had sort of been “testing” Asher’s potential ability, asking him to convince them of certain things. He was able to do so incredibly well every time- even for things that didn’t make sense, he could convince them to agree for just a moment before they really had time to remind themselves how ridiculous it was, such as dinosaurs having never been extinct or something stupid like that.

He found that with Chardy, if he really focused he could allow Chardy to see the *real* future or past, and on top of that he could actually make Chardy see whatever false one he wanted. He could completely fabricate a scenario and make Chardy see that upon contact with him, which was pretty interesting.

In private, he swore he’d never use that against Chardy. Honestly, he was scared of accidentally using his abilities against *anyone* .

One day after about two weeks, he was brought back to Burton's second home. As soon as they were alone together, he told Burton about his newfound abilities- stating how useful it could be when it came to their test subject and manipulating him.

They didn’t do anything with it that day, just essentially a brutal repeat of the last time, but the next time they went back there Burton relented and agreed to let Asher go into the room with the subject.

Standing outside the door, Asher was trembling and his palms were sweaty. He hadn’t told Daniel what he was planning on doing, and he wasn’t recording any of this. He was hyper aware of the fact that he could die right inside that room, and that his death would be widely

unknown. He also knew that this poor guy wouldn't stand a chance if he didn't do this.

"Hey, Burton?" Asher said quietly.

"Yes?" The man asked, sounding exasperated.

"I- don't know how well my abilities will work with someone else's brain waves interfering. Do you think you could stand at least fifty feet away while I do this? I was thinking I could text you once I'm ready to come out-" Asher asked.

"I don't think it'll be a problem for me to watch. Remember, the materials are made to block stuff like that." Burton grumbled.

"It's made to block out *his* powers, sure- but we have no clue what it does to mine- please, sir- I believe I will be less nervous without an audience as well-" Asher insisted, fighting to keep his voice steady.

"... Fine. Text me when you're ready to leave." Burton mumbled, and without warning he opened the door and pushed Asher inside, quickly shutting it again before he had time to react.

He fell forwards with a yelp, launching his hands out in front of himself to not land right on his face. He never hit the floor, though- instead he was caught by a few of the subject's extra appendages. He gasped and pulled away from them almost frantically, looking up to see the freakishly tall guy looming over him with a somewhat pissed off expression. He pressed himself back into the corner of the room by the door, trying to steady his breathing through quick gulps of air.

"Um- H-hey-" He mumbled, but got absolutely no response. The subject was completely still now, like a statue- even his tentacles didn't move.

"... Please- please don't hurt me, alright? I- I just want to get to know you. What's your name?" He asked softly, making his voice sound more gentle.

"... Get out." The man grumbled. His voice was deep and raspy, he sounded like he didn't use it much.

"I can't, not yet- Listen I- I want to help you-" Asher said, glancing over at the window. He couldn't see Burton, but he could barely see into the room from this angle. He needed to be careful with what he said, though- just in case Burton was somehow listening.

Turning back to the subject, he suddenly felt an impending sense of doom and fear increase, weighing in on him and making it hard to breathe.

He thought maybe the guy had begun moving normally again, but his vision was struggling to focus so it was hard to tell. It was starting to feel like the beginnings of a panic attack.
“Leave.” The subject said firmly. His heart rate increased and he started to feel a little faint, until he had the thought to try and interject the man's ability. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a moment, focusing hard on blocking out the dread emanating from the other person in the room.

Shockingly, it worked, and he somewhat quickly started to feel himself calming down.

“That doesn’t work on me, alright? So you’ll know I’m being honest- ya know, I have a hard time with that too- I never know when people are being honest with me. I- I convinced one of my friends at school earlier that dinosaurs were still alive- can you believe that? That’s my ability- if I talk long enough, I can make anything true or false-” Asher said with a small, breathless chuckle.

“... Vesper.” The man mumbled.

“... What-..? Oh- your- your name- you’re Vesper?” Asher asked softly, and the subject- *Vesper* - nodded.

“Oh- that- that’s a sick fuckin name, dude- way better than my name- my name is *Asher* -” He mumbled with a small, breathy chuckle.

“... I like that name.” Vesper said quietly, shifting to slowly sit just on the floor in the middle of the room. Even doing something so normal he didn't look like just any guy, sitting cross-legged in this place.

“... Oh- well, thank you-” Asher relaxed a bit and sat down as well, staying close enough to the wall that he could lean against it.

“Why- why do you want to help me?” Vesper asked, sounding a little suspicious. Asher glanced back at the window, trying to signal that he didn’t want to say too much. Luckily Vesper seemed to understand, nodding a tiny bit.

“Well, I’m working with Burton to see just what we can make of you. But I- I have a hard time seeing you being repeatedly hurt, so I wanted to suggest a new method where I *talk* you through what needs done

instead, but I needed to make sure you'd actually listen to me first. Does that make sense?" Asher explained, trying to give an expression saying he was mostly lying. Vesper just nodded again- Asher was glad he seemed able to easily pick up on his subtle cues.

"Good- now, why don't you tell me a little about yourself? I understand it must be hard being in this bland room, but do you have any interests you've held onto?" Asher asked.

"... Motorcycles. I used to wish I could have one." Vesper replied. Asher was a little surprised he got an answer so quickly, smiling a bit as he responded.

"Oh yeah, they're cool as shit- I wonder if Burton would let me show you pictures of some newer models of them. Perhaps I should suggest some new activities relating to the modern world- if he wants you to be efficient you need to be well read and knowledgeable-" He said with a hum.

"I… would appreciate that." Vesper replied. He still seemed almost bewildered at this turn of events, though his expression or body language didn't show any of that so Asher wondered how he even got that, or any, impression from Vesper.

"Excellent- well, thank you for your time and cooperation- I'll speak with Burton and see what changes we can make around here-" Asher said with a smile, pulling out his phone to text Burton to come let him out.

Burton seemed to agree to the changes he was suggesting, eager to see some more real progress with Vesper. Meanwhile, Asher kept planning how to get Vesper out of there with Daniel and the others.

He got to spend a few minutes each day talking with Vesper, but he knew that Vesper didn't trust him that much still. When Burton started talking about needing to find new test subjects, Asher knew he needed to do something quickly.

He called a meeting with Daniel, Lance, and Chardy- he wouldn't have minded the others being there too, but getting everyone together mid day was too hard and this couldn't wait. They all sat at the table to talk.

"Alright, I have a plan that I really do think will work. I don't think you guys are going to like it much, though-" Asher said.

“Well, what is it?” Lance questioned.

“Next time I go to Burton's house, I need you to come with me, Lance- maybe someone else too, if we need a better driver. But my idea is that when me and Burton are downstairs working with Vesper, Burton needs to suddenly get a call bringing him away from the whole downstairs area. When that happens, I’ll just ask him to leave the keycard with me so I can keep working while he deals with whatever is going on-” Asher explained.

“... And what would that call be about, exactly?” Daniel asked.

“A fire. On the opposite side of the house, I need Lance to fly up there and completely set fire to a room- the one with the tanning beds in it. It’s on the second story, the corner room at the back left corner- a ton of huge windows, and all kinds of flammable things. The fire needs to be big and bad enough that it’ll burn the whole place down, just- give us enough time to get out. I’ll sneak Vesper out to the left side of the house, where I’ll tell him how to get to the car near the woods. By then Lance should’ve had more than enough time to make it to the car- I’ll tell him a key word that if you guys say it, he’ll know you’re the right people- I’m thinking pickles or something-” Asher replied.

“Hang on, what about you?” Lance asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I have to pretend I’ve just barely made it out in time- I’m still working out the kinks in that bit, because I don’t exactly want to go back into a burning building- but I need to cut it close enough to make Burton think that Vesper and all that information died with the house and I just barely got out-” Asher mumbled.

“... I don’t like it.” Lance muttered.

“I knew you wouldn’t- that’s another reason why I asked Chardy to be here. Do you think you’d be able to see far enough ahead that you could tell me if I’ll find a way to make it work? I *promise* I won’t do anything to alter what you see. I want to ensure that this will work too- too much is at stake if it wouldn’t work, not just me-” Asher asked, turning to Chardy. He honestly did mean it- he *did* want this to work, and he didn’t intend on interfering with what Chardy saw.

Chardy looked hesitant for a moment before he sighed and reached out to take Asher’s hand. The room was tense with silence for a moment before Chardy looked down at the table and let go of Asher’s hand.

“I-... I really wish you’d come up with a different plan, but this one will work- you may develop some minor injuries, but you’d get away with everything and no one should get caught-” Chardy murmured.

Now excited, Asher turned to Daniel and Lance. Both looked incredibly hesitant about this whole situation.

“Okay, but then what? So you go back to the building, and Lance just drives Vesper back here?” Daniel asked.

“Well- yes, but he’s incredibly distrusting- I doubt he’ll be all too eager to just run around doing whatever you say- I thought maybe if you could just set him up in a spare room in the lobby with some water and crackers until I get back, then I’ll talk to him again and figure something out-” Asher replied.

“Oh my god, Asher- you can’t treat him like a toddler-” Lance said, clearly trying not to laugh, even though he still seemed a little annoyed about their situation.

“Well I- I dunno, if he wants to come in the elevator and come upstairs then maybe he’ll be fine in the living room or in my room, or in the spare room we have across from mine-” Asher stammered.

“We probably ought to figure out what on earth we’re going to do with him- I mean, after everything he’s been through just in what you’ve seen shouldn’t he go to the hospital?” Lance asked.

“... I- have a very bad feeling about that- there’s loads of people like Burton who would hurt him or keep experimenting on him, you know- and many of them would be in the government. I think- I think maybe for now we should keep this secret-” Asher replied, Chardy was nodding in agreement as he spoke.

“I understand your point, but we can’t keep him here if he’s a danger. We’ll have to play it by ear, but for now plan A will just be to get him here safely until Asher gets back and we can reassess. Now I don’t want to assume anything, but if Vesper is capable of helping us out here then I can have him pardoned in the eyes of the law and we wouldn’t have to keep him a secret anymore. So legally he’d be safe, however, if say, the mafia decides they’re interested…” Daniel trailed off at the end.

“Okay, I like plan A. I know his abilities would be incredibly useful, it’s just a matter of whether or not he wants to. Oh- and I was going to go out shopping to see if I can find some things for him to make him

more comfortable when he gets here. Can anyone give me a ride to the mall tomorrow?" Asher asked.

"I can. What're gonna get? You've conveniently failed to record any of your conversations with Vesper." Lance mumbled, crossing his arms.

"I do it for his privacy- he deserves that much, Burton doesn't because he's a horrible person- but Vesper hasn't done anything wrong. Anyways I need to grab him some little motorcycle figures, definitely some softer and nicer clothes, and maybe some chocolates. He said that was his favorite candy as a kid- and I just-... his childhood was taken from him at such a young age- I feel horrible for him…" Asher mumbled.

"... We know how you feel, Asher- I'll give you some money to contribute towards the clothes, since if you weren't getting them now then I would be anyways-" Daniel said softly.

They discussed some more of the details after that, and Asher was glad to see that despite their reluctance, they seemed like they were going to allow Asher's plan. Deep in the back of his mind, he felt bad- he felt like he was manipulating them, and even worse was that he more than likely was even if he didn't mean to.

At least saving Vesper might make up for some of the horrible things he'd done.

When the day came to do just that, he was beyond nervous as he went to Burton's house. Everyone knew the plan now, but only Lance and Francis were the ones to follow Asher. Francis had a nicer car than Lance that might blend in, plus if anything were to go wrong his ice might be useful.

They didn't follow instantly after Asher, though- it would be too suspicious for this all to happen too early. At around noon, he felt his phone buzz- he couldn't check it, but he was sure that it was Lance telling him they were there and ready.

About a half an hour later, Burton was too distracted yelling at a very distressed Vesper- he pulled out his phone and sent a very quick text to the group chat that had everyone in it, so that everyone was getting the most recent updates.

"Now" was all he sent. Then, he turned to Burton with a sigh.

"As amusing as this is, it isn't getting us anywhere. Perhaps I should

go talk to him?" Asher suggested as he stood up from his chair. Burton grumbled something under his breath.

"He needs to learn how to fucking listen. Perhaps I do need to think about cutting back on food supplies." Burton spat.

"I know, I know- it's beyond frustrating. Take a sip of water- perhaps you need a moment to have a smoke?" Asher suggested.

"You might be right, but I'd rather wait a little longer." The man replied.

Asher remained silent as Burton continued to try to make Vesper obey his commands for about another five minutes, and that's when he received a phone call.

"Damnit!" Burton shouted, tossing his mug across the room as he grabbed his phone and answered it.

" *What* ??" He demanded. Asher just watched with wide eyes as Burton listened to whoever was on the other end of the phone tell him something.

"God fucking– okay, I'll be up there in a minute. Shit!" Burton shouted as he hung up.

"One fucking thing after another." He grumbled as he turned to the door.

"Hang on- give me the keycard so I can go in to talk to him, then when you come back we'll be all ready to continue-" Asher said, holding out his hand. Clearly Burton was in an urgent enough mood that he didn't feel like arguing, he just tossed the keycard into Asher's hand.
"If he gets out, you're replacing him." Burton grumbled as he walked swiftly out of the room. Asher instantly turned and opened the door, going inside.

Vesper was sitting on the floor, leaned back against the wall and panting to catch his breath from the last bout of electrocution. His fear weighed heavily in the air, but Asher didn't allow it to mess with him.

"Vesper, I really need you to trust me, okay? I know it's hard, but I'm trying to help you- get up-" He walked over to Vesper and offered him a hand. Vesper watched him suspiciously for a moment before taking

his hand and pulling himself up, which nearly pulled Asher down, but he managed to stay standing.

“I’m gonna get you out of here, alright? Now to do that I need you to take out all the cameras I tell you to and do exactly as I say. Do you understand?” Asher whispered firmly as he turned to leave the cell, holding onto Vesper’s hand still. Vesper seemed dazed as he stumbled along with Asher, just nodding a little.

They made their way upstairs and through the building, Vesper destroyed any cameras with his tentacles as soon as Asher told him to, which assured that they wouldn’t be seen if the footage was somehow recovered. As they neared the door out the side of the house, Asher slowed so he could talk as they got out. It wasn’t apparent that the entire building was on fire yet, but Vesper was moving with as much urgency as if he knew it was.

“Vesper, listen to me- I need to leave you here so I can finish the cover up. I promise I’ll explain everything later, but for now I need you to go into the woods straight out of this door. Once you can’t see the house too well, turn right and go until you reach the road- there’s a white car parked there. There’s two men in their twenties who will meet you there named Lance and Francis, they’re gonna ask if you need a ride to the cheesecake factory- that’s how you know it’s them. Say yes, get in the car, and do everything they say until I meet back up with you later-” Asher said quickly, growing dizzy as he ran out of breath to speak as fast as he could. By the time he was done they were at the door and Asher was about to open it.

He turned to Vesper to make sure that he’d been listening, but he looked very bewildered.

“Vesper, *please* - this is so important- I *need* you to listen to them just for a little bit- they won’t hurt you-” Asher pleaded, and Vesper nodded firmly. He let go of Asher’s hand and pushed out the door, quickly disappearing into the woods.

Asher backtracked a little bit until he got to the elevator, and then waited there for a moment. He heard sounds of chaos and people running around, but there were no signs of fire as far as he could see yet.

He needed to wait until the *very* last second; he wouldn’t have known there was a fire if he actually was still downstairs with Vesper. Once the ear-splitting fire alarms started going off, he waited about how

long he thought it would've taken him to react if he was where he was supposed to be, doing what he was supposed to be doing.

By the time he started jogging down the hallway, he felt his blood run cold as he noticed the fire now coating every curtain and piece of furniture in the hall- even some of the doors were on fire.

He picked up the pace, running through the hall as he heard the house creak and groan around him. It was becoming hard to breathe from the smoke, so he covered his mouth with his shirt and ran faster.

Tears stung his eyes as he rounded corner after corner, heading towards the front door that somehow felt like it was just getting farther and farther away in this hellish house. The air around him was becoming painfully hot as the flames grew closer and closer, reaching out for him like the limbs of the dead.

He felt something land on him as he ran- it wasn't heavy, but he fell to the ground anyways.

He yelped as he felt the flames searing into his flesh- he frantically tossed off whatever was on him, which he saw now was one of the curtains. Luckily, he wasn't severely burned, because it happened so fast and his movement stopped his clothes from catching on fire, but now his arms and back had some burns littered over them.

He jumped up and ran as fast as his tiring legs could carry him towards the door, just barely making it out as he heard the roof begin to fall.

He practically tossed himself out of the front door, stumbling and landing hard in the grass. There were about two dozen of the people working in the building there, and several ambulances were just arriving.

He was in an odd state of shock as the ambulances started taking everyone away- only one person was severely burned, but everyone else was pretty much okay with some mild burns or coughing from the smoke inhalation. Burton was absolutely *livid* , screaming at everyone around him and demanding the firefighters save his house. He didn't get the chance to talk to Asher before they were both taken to the hospital, and Asher wasn't sure if that was good or bad.

Asher had tried to tell them that he didn't need to go, but they insisted that he did. On the way there, he pulled out his phone to see that just about everyone had been talking in the group chat- first it was Lance's

confirmation message that they'd gotten Vesper and left, then it was everyone asking if Asher was okay.

"Im fine, md it out. going 2 hospital, Dan can you meet me there to discharge me? sm minor burns but I want to get home to Vesper" He sent quickly, careful not to let anyone else see his phone.

"I'm going to let them treat your burns first, if there's no signs of anything serious I'll discharge you. I'm going to stay until they get back with Vesper so I can get him settled, then as soon as I'm done with that I'll come meet you" Daniel sent back. Asher just sent a thumbs up and put his phone in his pocket again.

It was getting more and more difficult to breathe, and he was pretty sure he passed out for a moment when they had him lay down- but he wasn't too worried. Whatever drug they'd given him made everything feel floaty and made his pains go away, almost like a more intense post-cigarette feeling.

He wasn't sure how long he was there, but by the time Daniel was signing the discharge papers after speaking with the doctors, that floaty feeling was starting to wear off. The next thing he knew he was in the passenger seat of Daniels car heading back home.

"Just to let you know, Vesper was having a hard time when he first came in- I couldn't get a clear answer out of him, but I believe he was worried and scared for himself, and for you. He kept asking about you, so we put him in your room to calm him down- he should still be in there, but he refused to say anything to anyone after we got him in there. I'm sorry to put that responsibility on you right after you've just gone through this-" Daniel explained with a soft, gentle tone.

"Oh it- it's no big deal- he's gonna be just as tired as I am. I'm sure I can calm him enough that we can both sleep, then tomorrow I'll deal with the rest of this… I'm not sure when Burton is going to reach out, but I'm positive that he is going to be positively *irate* -" Asher mumbled.

"I think- I think it's about time that I step in to help you deal with that. When you speak with him next, make sure you have a way to protect yourself- tell him you also work with me if you can find a way to, and maybe let him know I'm interested in meeting up- okay?" Daniel said.

"… Well- alright- I'll see how the conversation goes-" Asher said with a sigh.

When they got back to their building, they headed upstairs. Daniel kept everyone else from asking him too many questions so he could just head straight for his room- luckily everyone seemed pretty understanding.

He knocked softly on the door before pushing it open- Vesper snapped his head around to look at him from where he sat on the floor in the corner of the room, near the closet.

“Hey, Vesper-” He smiled a bit as he slipped into the room and shut the door.

“... You’re alive. The fire one told me what he did.” Vesper grumbled.

“Yeah, well- I'm sure he didn’t explain it too well. Do you want me to tell you exactly what’s going on..?” Asher asked as he slowly went to sit next to Vesper, who nodded a little.

“Alright- I started working with Burton about two years ago. I started working with him because Lance- my brother, the phoenix- needed to get some information from him without him knowing, and I made myself the cover up. I want to make it abundantly clear that I *never* liked or trusted him- but the information I have access to now is too good to pass up. When he brought me to his house and I saw you, that was the first I’d heard of it- I already knew I couldn’t keep watching what he was doing to you, so we started planning to get you out. The plan went just about perfectly- Lance set the fire that drew Burton away, and I made it seem like I just barely managed to escape- Burton is going to believe you’re dead because the entire house is gone now. I watched the whole thing collapse right before I was taken to the hospital-” Asher explained, and Vesper listened intently.

There was a long pause of silence after Asher's words, but it didn't feel particularly awkward. Maybe that was just because they had quite a few quiet moments every time Asher had previously spoken to him.

“... Well… what now?” He eventually asked.

“Now- we aren’t really sure- but for the moment it’s getting you back into good health, and getting that weird ass shock collar off of you. If it’s okay with you, I can get Daniel in here to try and get it off?” Asher suggested, but Vesper looked a little hesitant.

“... Look I- I get it, I didn’t always grow up here- it took a long time for me to trust Daniel as much as I do. I still have my off days with them- I- I tried to stab him once- I’ve yelled at him before, but still

through all of that, he's *never* hurt me or said anything to insinuate that he would- we don't argue because he takes a lot of time to listen and talk through things… I- I wish I didn't trust him as much as I do, if I'm being honest- I know it's scary learning to trust people, too- but I hope you can at least trust me enough now when I say that I won't let *anyone* hurt you-" Asher said softly, looking at Vesper with a very serious expression.

"I-... You saved my life. I have no choice but to trust you." Vesper mumbled back.

"Don't- think of it like that- you always have the choice, even if it's not what I want. But- I'm gonna go get Daniel, we'll get that thing off of you, and then you can shower without worry of electrocution- I've got some new clothes for you to change into as well. I'm not sure exactly what size you are, so I just got some really big shirts and sweatpants- they're all soft though, softer than anything in your old room-" Asher said as he stood back up. Vesper seemed to perk up a bit at that.

"Really?" He asked.

"Mhm- and Daniel can help you figure out a good style, too- he buys all of us lots of clothes- so the few outfits I grabbed are just to get you through until you're fully settled-" Asher replied, poking his head out of the door to see Daniel standing in the living room talking to Lance.

"Uh- hey, Daniel- can you come help me really quick?" He called, and Daniel looked over.

"Oh, sure- I'll be right there-" He replied.

Daniel walked into Asher's room but stayed right by the door.

"What's up?" He asked, glancing at Vesper with a soft smile.

"I wanted to know if you could take a look at that thing around his neck- it was used to electrocute him, and I don't want it to malfunction or anything-" Asher said as he headed over to Vesper, who stood up but stayed in the corner of the room.

"I can try to get it off, if that's alright with you, Vesper- I'll need to be pretty close to you and I'll more than likely have to touch your neck-" Daniel said gently, not moving anywhere closer to Vesper.

"... Yes, please." Vesper mumbled, taking a small step towards him.

“Alright, come over here- I’ve got this little screwdriver with me that I might need to use- do you want to hold it until I need it?” Daniel asked, pulling out a very small metal tool. Vesper nodded as he walked towards the center of the room, stopping a few feet away from Daniel and holding out his hand to take the tool.

Daniel handed it over, then closed the distance to look over the shock collar and try to figure out how to get it off. He talked Vesper through every step of it, and after about five minutes of messing around he managed to get it off.

“There we are-” Daniel said as he pulled it away from Vesper's neck. Asher had to stand on the tips of his toes to see from his angle, but Vesper’s neck looked horribly scarred from the electric pulses, and still injured with sores from the device rubbing against his skin. Vesper instantly stepped back away from Daniel, but not all the way to the corner of the room yet.

“Thank you, Daniel- I’m gonna get him a change of clothes and some towels now- I’ll shout for you if we need anything else-” Asher said.

“Alright- if you want to get him set up in the spare room you can, otherwise I did put some extra bedding in there that he can use if he’d rather stay in here-” Daniel replied and slipped out of the room.

“Okay- let’s go get you a shower- there’s already all the soaps you’ll need in there, and I’ll bring your clothes that you can change into-” Asher said and went to his dresser to grab the clothes he’d gotten for Vesper.

Then he brought Vesper to the bathrooms and gave him the clothes as well as the towels.

“Alright, I’ll wait out here for you-” Asher said softly as he went to wait in the living room. Chardy and Lucinda were sitting out there watching TV.

“Hey, Asher- how’re you feeling..?” Chardy asked softly.

“Fine- whatever meds they gave me are pretty much gone now, so my newest set of burns hurt a little, but I’ll live-” Asher replied.

“I’m just- shocked at how everything went down- have you seen the news?? They’re coming up with *wild* conspiracies for how everything happened-” Lucinda chimed in.

“Pft- I’m not surprised. He has a lot of enemies, with any luck they’ll blame another bad person and get someone put behind bars who deserves to be there-” Asher mumbled.

“Perhaps- but do you think Mr. Burton is going to suspect you?” Chardy asked.

“Maybe, but I’m sure I’ll talk my way out of it- I’m glad you noticed all those things, Char- now that I’m more confident in my abilities I feel like I can focus on using them better. I can convince people of things faster, and I’m able to completely block out Vesper's ability as well-” He hummed.

“Huh… you know- now that you mention it, since you’ve been home I haven’t felt as anxious- when we were all around Vesper earlier everyone was feeling nervous because of his ability, but it lessened the farther away we were- now I don’t notice it at all-” Lucinda speculated.

“I wonder if you’re not just defending yourself against it, but rather messing up whatever waves emanating from him that causes the emotions to travel like that-” Chardy suggested.

“Huh- maybe-” Asher shrugged.

Fragile

Chapter Summary

> This chapter is basically nothing but fluff, I thought I would hate it because I'm bad at writing fluff but actually I enjoyed it :> Anyways little trigger warning for mentioned trauma/past bad events but it's not that extensive and its good for their healing.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The three of them continued chatting for a while until Vesper stepped out of the bathroom. Now that his hair was a tiny bit less tangled, it was actually about halfway down his back and dripping wet still. He sort of just stood awkwardly in the hallway until Asher got up and went over to him.

“Hey- I had a thought, would you want me to cut your hair-?” Asher asked as he took Vesper’s hand to lead him back to his room.

“... What?” Vesper mumbled, glancing over at Lucinda and Chardy, who were cautiously watching the interaction.

“I just noticed it’s really long and probably uncomfortable- we can’t bring you to a barber, but like- I’m sure I could get the bulk of it off with some scissors- we can even look up styles you wanna try if you don’t want to chop it all off?” Asher suggested, now slightly excited. He’d cut his own hair before and it never went too poorly, so he was relatively confident.

“... Okay. Sure.” Vesper replied. On the way back to his room, Asher grabbed the kitchen scissors.

They then sat on his bed and began looking through pictures on Pinterest of various different hair styles. Vesper ended up liking a slightly shorter than shoulder length layered cut. It looked a little complicated, but a YouTube tutorial later he stood behind Vesper and began snipping away, careful not to touch Vesper's skin with the scissors.

“Alright, all done-” He said after a while. The cut wasn’t perfect- the layers weren’t all entirely even, but he didn’t think it looked too bad. Surely better than before, anyways- plus he was able to brush it out

really well too. He had Vesper look at some pictures of it from every angle to make sure he liked it, which he luckily seemed to.

“Thank you, Asher.” Vesper said as he stood up from the desk chair he’d been sitting at.

“Oh, uh- you’re welcome- I mean, I just essentially got to hack at your hair for twenty minutes which is always fun so–” Asher mumbled, but Vesper spoke over him.

“No, I mean thank you for all of this. No one has ever done something so kind for me before…” Vesper said softly. Asher just smiled a bit, tucking his wings closer to himself in mild awkwardness.

“Yeah, of course- I- I couldn’t just leave you there, ya know-” He replied, looking at the floor. He hadn’t realized until now how close Vesper was standing to him. He reached out and held Asher’s face in his hands, tilting his head back up to look at him.

“You *could have* , but you didn’t. I owe you my life and then some. I can’t remember anyone acting so kind towards me- and I want to give you something in return. I want to make you feel safe, as you are trying to do for me- I won’t let anyone hurt you either.” Vesper said in a soft, deep tone. Asher went slightly pink as he listened to him talk- Vesper still hadn’t let go of him and he caught himself leaning into the older boy's hand a little.

This was so *strange* - it didn’t *feel* like embarrassment, but it must be- because why else would his face feel so warm, or why else would his hands be so shaky?

“O-okay- I- thank you-... I really- appreciate that…” He whispered. A moment later Vesper let go of him, and for just a second he felt mild disappointment- he already missed the warmth of Vesper's hands.

“A-anyways- um- where do you want to sleep tonight?” Asher asked awkwardly.

“... Can I stay here with you?” Vesper asked.

“Oh, sure- I’d offer to sleep on the floor, but I don’t think I’d be able to sleep- and I’m sure as hell not making you sleep on the floor, so are you okay sharing the bed?” Asher suggested.

“... Sure.” Vesper replied quietly.

“Okay, cool- I’ll grab those extra blankets and pillows from the spare room then. I’m sure eventually they’ll want you to move in there, but for now no one will care-” Asher hummed as he slipped out of the room for a moment. If he could, he’d pile his bed high with all kinds of soft plush things. Well, it wasn’t like he *couldn’t* , but rather he thought everyone else might find it a little odd.

He was pretty sure he wanted to do it because of his dragon hoarding urges, which he didn’t really talk about or act on even when he wanted to.

He came back with an armful of beddings, dropping them onto his bed next to Vesper.

“Okay- just uh- make yourself comfortable, but leave enough room on the bed for me-” Asher mumbled. Vesper nodded a bit and carefully shifted onto the bed, laying on the side closest to the wall much like Asher used to do when he was new here and didn’t trust it.

Vesper laid on his stomach and buried his face in the pillow. His extra appendages sort of snaked their way through the blankets, but after just a second he suddenly jumped up and hissed in pain.

Asher had been getting himself settled and jumped back a little, watching Vesper with wide eyes.

“What happened??” He asked with worry. Vesper held up one of his tentacles and looked it over- upon closer look, Asher cringed a little. It looked half chopped off, like someone tried to cut it but couldn’t get all the way through. It wasn’t a super new wound, as it didn’t seem to be bleeding or anything. Of course, Asher didn’t really know how these limbs worked- maybe they didn’t bleed at all.

“... Mr. Burton was trying to take a sample.” Vesper mumbled.

“... Oh- shit- I uh- must not have noticed before- do you want me to bandage it up? It- it looks like it’s gonna fall off-” Asher mumbled.

“It’ll grow back even if it does. But sure, if you want. Then it won’t bleed anywhere.” Vesper replied. Luckily Asher had bandages in his nightstand, so he grabbed them and shifted closer to Vesper.

“Alright, let me see it-” Asher said softly and held out his hands. Vesper hesitantly laid down the limb in his hands, watching Asher’s every movement very closely.

“Be careful, they’re very sensitive.” He mumbled.

“I will, I promise- my wings are sensitive too. If you want, you can pet them while I do this- I’ve been told it’s comforting, or something-” Asher offered. Vesper nodded a little, and soon Asher began very carefully wrapping up the wound. Vesper slowly stroked one of his wings as he did this- it felt nice, with how gentle and light his touch was. Asher didn’t typically like being treated like glass, or like he was fragile, but in this moment it was oddly comforting.

He hummed a bit as he finished up bandaging and tore off the excess, putting it back in his nightstand.

“Okay- does that feel okay? Too tight or too loose?” He asked, glancing over to Vesper. He was still holding onto the tentacle lightly, and he sort of absentmindedly felt along it. It was warm, but it didn’t feel quite like a skin texture- it was hard to explain exactly how it felt. It was almost like liquid, but solid- it felt oddly soothing despite him seriously being unable to wrap his brain around the physics of it.

“No, that’s fine. Thank you.” Vesper mumbled in response. The tentacle in Asher's hand slowly began to coil around his wrist and hand- very loosely though because it was still very much so injured.

Asher just smiled a little and laid down, sort of hugging his arms and the appendage to his chest.

“Goodnight-” He whispered and closed his eyes. He could feel Vesper’s eyes on him, watching him for a moment before he also laid down to go to sleep.

The next morning when Asher opened his eyes, Vesper was already awake but hadn’t moved, just laying there with his eyes open, staring up at the ceiling.

He sat up and stretched his arms above his head, yawning. In the back of his mind, he wondered where Calypso was- she hadn’t been around as much anymore. She’d disappear for days at a time then just reappear somehow.

But that didn’t matter at the moment, right now he needed to take care of Vesper.

“Good morning,” Asher cringed as his voice came out all raspy and dull, probably from all the smoke yesterday.

Vesper did not verbally respond, but he sat up and looked over at Asher. His injured tentacle was still lightly wrapped around Asher's wrist.

“Are you hungry? Daniel usually makes pancakes and bacon for breakfast- then I could properly introduce you to everyone-” He suggested.

“... I am hungry. How many other people are there?” Vesper quietly replied. His voice was low and smooth, and he didn't sound half asleep like Asher usually did when first waking up.

“Well, other than me and you there’s seven other people. I think they’re a little spooked around you- especially because of your ability, so I’m sure they’ll give you your space. You can sit next to me- there's two extra seats next to where I normally sit, so you can sit next to me and the empty seat-” Asher said, slowly standing up. He got a little dizzy as he did and stumbled to the side because of it.

He stiffened a little as he felt several of Vesper’s tentacles quickly wrap around his arms and chest firmly- he looked over to see Vesper watching him with concern knitted into his otherwise very monotone expression.

“Are you okay?” Vesper asked, standing up as well but not letting go of him. Asher was surprised that he didn’t feel incredibly uncomfortable at the contact.

“I- I’m fine- I just get a bit dizzy sometimes- I just need water, is all-” Asher stammered, forcing a small smile.

“... Okay- be careful.” Vesper mumbled and removed his limbs from Asher, holding them somewhat close to himself as he headed for the door. He waited for Asher to walk out first before following after him, though.

Daniel was in fact in the kitchen, cooking pancakes and bacon. He smiled over at Asher and Vesper.

“Good morning, you two- breakfast is almost ready. Will Vesper be joining us?” He asked in a rather chipper tone.

“Mhm, I was hoping to introduce him to everyone-” Asher replied. Looking around, Victor, Chardy, and Amelia were all already out in the living room. They were clearly trying not to make it obvious, but they were all trying to listen or glance over at Vesper, who now

looked quite uncomfortable.

Asher was a little surprised, and oddly glad that Vesper noticed so much. Sometimes it felt like Asher was going crazy when he seemed to pick up on things that no one else noticed or cared about.

“Oh, of course- unfortunately I will have to leave early today, though- I have a meeting to attend. If Mr. Burton reaches out to you, I implore you not to respond until I’m home- I certainly don’t want you meeting with him today also.” Daniel said with a humm.

“Okay, okay-” Asher mumbled and went to sit at his usual seat at the table, having Vesper sit next to him.

Over breakfast, everyone was able to introduce themselves and sort of let Vesper get a feel for the room. Asher ate some food to avoid any kinds of questions, but he ate just enough to fly under the radar.

Over the next few days, Vesper continued to stay in Asher’s room as he adjusted. They grew close quite fast- sometimes it felt like they could read each other's minds from how quick they understood nonverbal cues from the other.

Asher had completely forgotten on the first full day of Vesper's stay to give him the motorcycle figurines and the chocolates he'd gotten for Vesper though.

At some point they were just sitting, watching Tik Tok on Asher's phone and he suddenly remembered and jumped up out of bed where they had been half sitting, half laying against a pile of pillows, causing Vesper to jerk back and look at him with slightly wide eyes, his expression surprised.

“What happened? Are you okay?” Vesper asked, his tone slightly worried. He asked Asher if he was okay a lot, and Asher wasn’t honestly sure how to feel about it.

“I’m fine, sorry, I just remembered something-” Asher rambled quickly, heading over to his dresser.

The bag was still right on top of it, literally sitting *right there* and not one single time that Asher had passed by it did he ever actually think about it and think to give it to Vesper.

He grabbed the bag and headed back over to the bed, sitting next to Vesper. He felt a little bad as he noticed now Vesper was somewhat stiff as he sat there, whereas before he had been quite relaxed.

“Here, it's just a few things I thought that you might like and might help you settle in a little-” Asher smiled a bit as he handed the generic grocery store bag to Vesper, who seemed hesitant as he took it and peeked inside. He used one of his tentacles to grab the first object, which was one of the motorcycle figurines.

This specific one was a dark red color with black instead of silver everywhere that the metal would be, had this been a real motorcycle. Asher didn't know much about the terminology for these things, but he just thought that it looked cool so he'd grabbed it. He watched silently as Vesper removed the little metal and plastic figure from its container, twisting it around and looking it over.

It was hard to tell considering Vesper's eyes always seemed to glow a little, but it almost looked like he had a glimmer in his eye when looking at the object. He repeated the process with the other dark blue motorcycle, which honestly looked pretty similar in shape to the first one, and then he grabbed the neatly packaged bar of chocolate.

He sort of looked it over for a moment as if he wasn't quite sure what he was looking at, then he looked to Asher as if asking for help.

Asher could swear he felt his heart start to break as he realized Vesper hadnt had his favorite candy in so long that he didn't even know what it looked like, at least not when packaged up anyways.

“It's a chocolate bar- here let me open it for you-” Asher forced a small smile as he reached out to take the bar from Vesper. The way Vesper shifted seemed like he was going to instinctively pull away from Asher, but he stopped so quickly that it just looked like a small shift.

Asher grabbed the candy bar and opened up the wrapped, then broke off a piece and offered it to Vesper, who slowly grabbed it with his hand.

Seemingly without realizing, Vesper curled one of his tentacles around Asher's hand that was holding the rest of the chocolate bar, but Asher honestly couldn't say he minded it when Vesper did things like that. It did seem to happen pretty often, where Vesper wouldn't realize when his extra appendages were doing something.

“Thank you…” Vesper whispered, his voice was so small and almost

frail, Asher just wanted to hug him. But he didn't, instead he just nodded a little and offered the rest of the bar back to him.

“You’re welcome, I hope you like this brand cuz I guess they're different somehow. We can try out a few different ones and see which is your favorite though,” Asher replied with a small shrug.

They got back to watching Asher's phone after that while Vesper slowly ate almost half of the chocolate. He was still holding onto the two motorcycle figures even as they went to dinner later, and Asher couldn't help but find it a little cute.

No- cute wasn't the right word, he quickly reminded himself. Maybe it was just a little funny or something, but he needed to stop referring to things that Vesper did as cute or endearing. Those weren't things friends thought about each other, right?

After the first two days, some normalcy began to return, so Asher spent a bit of time with the others- but he still tried to be around Vesper a lot. Surprisingly, he hadn’t heard anything from Burton yet- though he was often too busy to think much of it.

He was trying to get Vesper caught up with everything going on, since it had been a few years since he’d had contact with the outside world. He also helped Vesper research any of the things he was particularly interested in, such as motorcycles or certain subjects in school. Luckily he seemed pretty well read- Burton clearly wanted a smart slave.

Vesper seemed quite grateful for Asher, and quickly grew very comfortable around him. They talked a lot more than Asher would’ve thought he’d want to when he first met Vesper, but he didn’t mind it at all. Vesper was basically mute when they were around anyone else though- he hoped Vesper would grow to be a little more comfortable with the others, but he knew better than to force interactions- he understood how it felt to not trust these same people, even though he mostly trusted them now.

At the moment, it was now Saturday evening and he, Vesper, Chardy and Lance were all sitting on the couch watching a movie. Vesper was on the left of him leaning against the arm of the couch, Chardy was on his right and Lance was on a smaller seat by himself.

It was a horror movie, and despite how much he tried not to jump or gasp or anything, it was sort of freaking him out. He never really watched horror films like this and didn’t realize how much it got to

him, but he kept finding excuses to look at his phone or walk out of the room during parts with basically any sort of weapon or violence.

There was a particularly startling jumpscare, which damn near made him jump up out of his seat- both Vesper and Chardy looked over with concerned expressions, but before anything could be said Asher's phone started ringing. That was like just another jumpscare to him, but this time he covered up his flinch by quickly standing up and strolling out of the room, trying to seem casual about it.

He knew he failed, hell he hadn't even said anything to anyone as he just rushed out of the room.

His hands shook and his heart pounded in his chest as he sped walked to his bedroom, simultaneously pulling out his phone to answer it.

He felt his heart drop into his stomach when he saw that it was Burton calling him. Hesitating a second, he shut his bedroom door behind himself and with trembling hands answered the phone, bringing it up to his ear.

"... Hello?" He asked quietly.

"Hello, Asher. Glad to hear you're still alive, and didn't care enough to check on me." Burton's voice was laced with venom as he spoke- oddly enough it was a similar tone that he'd heard Dexter use before, and maybe even his mother.

"... I'm sorry- I just-" He coughed, it wasn't an entirely fake cough- but it was definitely a little exaggerated to get his point across.

"I haven't been feeling too great- I apologize, sir- but I figured you would have the best healthcare options, and–" Asher stopped as soon as he heard a soft knock at the door. Burton began rambling about how Asher should *always* check on his boss and a whole ton of other things he didn't listen to super closely. He muted the phone so Burton could no longer hear anything on his end, then opened the door just enough to peek outside and see Vesper.

"What's going on?" Vesper whispered, clearly a little worried.

"It's Burton- you can come in just-... don't talk-" Asher whispered back and opened the door wide enough for Vesper to come inside. They both sat on the bed just as Burton was finishing his half angry speech, and Asher unmuted the phone.

“I know- I know, I’m sorry- I didn’t mean to make you feel that way. Do you want to meet up so I can see how you’re doing in person? Maybe tomorrow?” Asher asked, and he realized he was using the same rehearsed lines he used to use with Dexter.

“Pft. That’s the best you can offer? I ought to fire you, kid.” Burton spat.

“No no, please don’t- I’m sorry, Mr. Burton- I love my job-” Asher said quickly. He internally cringed at the sad way Vesper looked at him- as if even Vesper thought he was being genuine.

“Yeah, right. Fine then, meet me at noon tomorrow at that nice restaurant I told you about last week, if you even remember that conversation.”

“Okay- okay, I remember, I think-” Asher said, then hesitated a second. “... But I- I need to bring-... my dad- he um- figured out because of this and wanted to talk to you-” He added, his voice now barely over a mumble.

“Great. Fine. Just be there.” Burton grumbled and then hung up. Asher sighed, tossing his phone to the side and burying his face in his hands while he leaned over to rest his elbows on his knees.

He stiffened a little as he felt Vesper's arms and several spare limbs wrap around him in a tight hug, but once he realized that’s what it was he relaxed a little. He leaned into Vesper and shifted to hug him back- this was probably the most physical contact Vesper had had in who knows how long.

“I-... sorry, Vesper- I didn’t-... I was lying to him- I wouldn’t be that upset if I couldn’t work with him-...” He whispered, somewhat awkwardly.

“It wasn’t that, it was-... the way you said all those things sounded very practiced… why did you have to learn to say things like that…?” Vesper asked softly. He was always particularly gentle or kind when talking to Asher, but something in the way he spoke now just made Asher want to curl up and cry. Something about the concern, or maybe it was the desire to actually know what was going on inside his head. He felt that way about conversations with Chardy, Daniel, and Lance- but this just wasn’t the same somehow.

“Oh-... it- it’s a long story-...” Asher whispered. He knew it’d feel nice to talk to Vesper about things like that- maybe because he knew

Vesper would likely understand better than anyone else- but he also didn't want to burden Vesper with his traumas when Vesper had clearly gone through worse.

"I've got time… I don't think either of us were really enjoying that movie, anyways…" Vesper murmured, resting his chin on top of Asher's head so his breath sort of rustled Asher's hair. It tickled a little, but also felt incredibly comforting for some reason- he was starting to find that many things involving Vesper felt comforting, even though most of them didn't really make sense.

"Okay but-... I feel bad telling you a bunch of my problems and you never really talk about your own-... you can tell me anything you want to, you know-..." Asher said quietly.

"I'll keep that in mind, but right now I want to hear your thoughts…" Vesper replied, and Asher took a deep breath.

"I mainly had to say things like that around one of my brother's friends-... his name is Dexter. I'm not sure exactly when he and Lance met, but I know I was a little jealous of how much time Dexter spent with Lance. Eventually I started hanging out with them too, though- me and Dexter grew closer but he-... he had- issues- and tried to uh-... off himself- a few times- and he always… he called me to help him, a lot- and after that I think he realized it was really easy to make me do whatever he wanted- I don't know when my ability developed, I thought I must've been pretty young because for a long time I've been able to talk myself out of situations- but I never was able to with him. He- he did a lot of things to me that I-... I really didn't like, and if I'm being honest I'm *terrified* of being around him because of that… But Lance is still friends with him- he doesn't know about most of what happened, and I-... I don't know if I want to tell him…" Asher explained in a quiet tone, like someone might be listening.

"Oh… what are some of the things he did…?" Vesper asked, and Asher internally cringed.

"It-... it's some pretty heavy stuff- I–..." Asher started, but Vesper spoke over him in that soft tone again that just melted Asher's resolve.

"It's okay, Asher… I can handle whatever you've got to say…"

"... he-... he's um- hurt me before- like- hitting and kicking and stuff… and- you know- been physical in ways that weren't-... right-" Asher murmured, his throat felt like it was closing as he spoke- like he

thought Vesper would think it was ridiculous or blame him for those things happening. Lance never outright did that, but it was similar when Asher opened up about smaller discrepancies and he was scared of anyone else doing it to him as well.

But Vesper didn't do anything of the sort- he hugged Asher tighter and sat in silence for a long moment, long enough for tears to well up in Asher's eyes.

"I'm so sorry…" Vesper whispered, curling the rest of his tentacles around Asher, almost as if trying to shield him from the rest of the world.

"It-... damnit… I-... it's fine, I'm fine…" Asher trembled as he spoke, trying not to let the dam break and just start crying right there in Vesper's arms.

"No, it's not okay… what happened to you- what happened to both of us isn't okay… if we keep saying that it's fine, we'll both be hurt again in the same way…" Vesper replied softly.

"You-... you're right… I- I *know* you are, but-..." He trailed off.

"It's easier to *say* that you agree than to actually change the mindset, I know… but lets- we can work on it together, okay..? I-... sometimes struggle too… you know, Burton wasn't always bad to me… he used to be like- like a father… and now I know everything he did was still horrible, even when I thought things weren't so bad- but-... it's still hard seeing him for the man he is sometimes, and not the man he constructed when he was first raising me…" Vesper mumbled.

Asher hugged Vesper a bit tighter and hesitated a while before speaking.

"... Can I-... ask a really sensitive question..? And- it's always okay if you don't want to answer it…" Asher asked.

"Sure..?" Vesper replied cautiously.

"... What-... what was it like, losing your wings…? I- I can't even imagine it- when-... when he told me about that I wanted to throw up…" Asher mumbled.

"It-.... it was like losing a part of myself… more than on a physical scale- like I lost some of my very *being* … and I know that realistically, I *am* still technically a bird hybrid, I still have the same instincts and

such but-... it's just not the same, you know..?" Vesper explained- his voice shook like he was also trying not to cry.

"What… what kind of bird are you..?" Asher asked.

"I was never told an exact name… some kind of dove species- one that didn't like to fly, so maybe I'd never learn how to but-... it would've been nice…" He replied.

"I can fly… I wish I was strong enough, so I could carry you with me…" Asher said quietly.

"Hm.. me too… what's it like..?"

"It- it's freeing… I mean- I don't get to do it that often, given where we live… but it's nice when I can… it starts to hurt eventually, wings are a lot of maintenance…" He paused for a moment, realizing he shouldn't be complaining about something Vesper desperately wanted, but could never have again. "I'm sorry if anything I say about them is upsetting…"

"I'm happy you still get to be who you are, and have that experience… it'll almost be like I get to live vicariously through you, too…" Vesper forced a small chuckle.

"Yeah… you know- there are ways you can sort of feel like you're flying- like zip-lining or gliding in those hang glider things-" Asher suggested.

"Yeah, maybe someday…" Vesper said with a sigh.

They both just sat in silence for quite a while before Asher spoke again.

"Do-... do you think you'll want to stay here-...? Like- permanently…? I know we haven't really had a chance to talk about what that would entail but-..."

"For the time being, I want to be wherever you are… Maybe things will change in the future- I'm not sure how I feel about this place, but I feel like you've got my back more than anyone else possibly could and I don't want to give that up-" Vesper replied.

"Oh-... well- I mean, it's not really all that bad- I- the worst part of it is dealing with people like Burton, but really only me and Daniel have to do that. Everyone else works very much behind the curtains,

essentially- it's a lot of sneaking around and stealing information, or spying to get it. I put myself in a bad spot, and I'm in a little too deep to back out now. But you get free housing, food, clothing, and education- Daniel even teaches things like self defense, shooting, knife wielding and stuff- it's intimidating at first because when he's holding a weapon and showing you how to use it, it feels very vulnerable- but he's a very good teacher and doesn't hurt you even in the hand to hand combat-" Asher explained.

"It doesn't sound like a bad thing- I just want to observe for a little longer. I can't stay if I dislike the people-" Vesper grumbled.

"Yeah, I get it- but ya know, some of them are really hard to dislike- like Chardy. He's a good friend of mine- he's super sweet, maybe we can all three hang out sometime? He's the only other person I've really opened up to this much, because he's so understanding about it- and he doesn't tell things to Daniel or Lance-" Asher said.

"... Right- is- is Daniel your father? You called him that with Burton, but you keep calling him by name." Vesper asked.

"Oh, no- he's not my dad. My father lives outside the city, assuming he's even still alive- I don't care to check. He's a horrible man, and he killed-... my mom- right in front of me." Asher spat, his voice suddenly becoming strained at the end.

"Oh…" Vesper shifted a little to look down at Asher, gently cupping his face in his hand. Asher went a tiny bit pink, leaning into his hand a little.

"I wish you didn't have to go through so much pain…" He added softly.

"I wish neither of us did…" Asher mumbled and buried his face in Vesper's shoulder. At this point he'd just been firmly ignoring it whenever he felt himself getting flustered around Vesper.

He was glad to see Vesper talking so much though, that was probably the longest conversation they had, certainly the most Vesper had spoken all at once. And Vesper just had such a way of speaking, maybe it was his voice, maybe it was the wording, or a combination of both, but Asher found it hard not to be comforted whenever Vesper spoke to him like that.

They kept talking softly and essentially cuddling until about twenty minutes later when there was a knock on the door. Asher sighed and

slowly shifted away from Vesper, who completely let go of him so he could go open the door.

Chardy was outside, and he smiled a bit at Asher.

“Hey- are you okay? You left so suddenly-” Chardy asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine- sorry- it’s just- Burton called, then me and Vesper were talking and neither of us really wanted to go back to the movie- sorry-” Asher replied somewhat awkwardly.

“Oh- you should’ve told us, Asher- what did he say??” Chardy asked, now much more concerned.

“He just- wanted to meet, so I need to tell Daniel we have to meet with him tomorrow- I’m just about certain he thinks Vesper’s dead, though- I’m not too worried honestly. I am pretty tired though- can you please tell Lance that we’re going to bed-?” Asher replied.
“Oh- uh- sure- Vesper’s still-... staying in your room?” Chardy asked, and suddenly Asher felt a little defensive.

“Well- yeah, he’s still settling in- it’s not easy, you know-” He muttered.

“I know, I didn’t mean it like that- I just- I thought he’d want his own space sooner rather than later, but he does seem to like spending time with you-” Chardy mumbled.

“... Yeah- sorry, I don’t mean to be snippy. I’m just tired- goodnight-” Asher said with a sigh.

“Goodnight- Chardy replied quietly, turning to walk away as Asher shut the door.

Chapter End Notes

I ended up having to edit this chapter like three times so I hope its not all wonky, so sorry!

Into the lions den

Chapter Summary

> Bit of a shorter chapter compared to the last ones, I have a lot to do today so I just wanted to push it out really quick.
> Asher and Daniel have a meeting with Burton, then recite what happened, also some issues with an eating disorder but overall this chapter was just little baby steps for plot

The next morning, Asher went upstairs to Daniels' floor and knocked lightly on the door.

“One moment-” He heard the man call from inside. A moment later Daniel came and opened the door.

“Oh, good morning Asher- what’s up?” Daniel asked with a little smile.

“Heyyy- uh- so Burton called me last night, and I set up a meeting to go see him at a restaurant later on today- around noon-” Asher mumbled.

“... Ah- okay- and you let him know I wanted to go with you?” Daniel asked.

“Yep- but um- I told him- quite a few lies so he wouldn’t find out much about me, ya know- and- well, he thinks you’re my strict dad- so-” Asher said awkwardly, looking at the ground. Daniel was silent for what felt like an eternity, and Asher couldn’t bring himself to look back up at the man.

“... Oh- I see- I uh- assume you’re going to keep up that lie?” He replied.

“Mhm- it- would be a little awkward to admit to lying now-” Asher murmured.

“Yeah, of course- I’ll uh- I’ll get ready after I make breakfast for the others, then-” Daniel replied.

He was a little nervous for breakfast that morning, if he was being honest with himself. He’d been eating more for a while, since he’d

helped Vesper- but now he'd stepped on enough toes and upset Chardy enough to feel that he didn't deserve that much anymore.

However, he'd been eating every meal with Vesper, who was still somehow acutely aware of *everything* going on with Asher.

Now, he needed to figure out a way to get out of it- it would be easy enough to say he wasn't hungry for breakfast, and *maybe* he could get away with pretending to be so stressed out with Burton that he couldn't eat lunch- but then for dinner he'd have no excuse. Maybe he could come up with a reason to get out of being there at all, but Vesper hadn't had a single meal without Asher and he was sure that he wouldn't want to sit at the table and eat without Asher there.

But at least he knew how to safely get out of breakfast. When everyone sat down he just didn't grab a plate, just went to his normal spot once Vesper had his food.

"Aren't you going to eat anything?" Chardy asked, tilting his head to the side a bit.

"Nah- I'm not feeling really hungry right now. Might be nerves for lunch with Burton later-" He replied quietly.

"Oh shit, I forgot about that-" Victor blurted out, and Amelia elbowed him hard in the side.

"If you don't want to go, you don't have to-" Amelia softly suggested.

"I *do* want to- I need to know what he thinks happened with Vesper, so I know if we're in deep shit or not-" Asher replied.

"Fair enough-" Chardy murmured.

No one questioned him further, luckily- and the rest of breakfast went smoothly. He spent the rest of the morning stressing out with Vesper until it was time to leave, then next thing he knew he and Daniel were pulling up to the restaurant.

They both got out of the car and nervously headed inside- Daniel was wearing a nice suit, and Asher was just wearing his usual sweater and cargo pants.

There were quite a few people already at the restaurant, but when they told the hostess who they were there to meet, she led them into a private dining room. It was clearly meant for bigger parties, but

Burton said alone at the head of the table meant for twelve. Asher slowly walked along the right side of the table and sat next to Burton, Daniel sat on Asher's other side.

He chose this side because Burton was right handed, so if he chose to try to swing at Asher he wouldn't be able to wind back as far as he could with his left, so either he could dodge a blow from the left or one from the right wouldn't hurt as bad.

"Hello, sir- how are you today?" Asher asked in his respectful, admiring, practiced tone.

"Fine." Burton grumbled, then turned to Daniel.

"Ah, pleasure to meet you. You've raised a very smart child." Burton's tone changed up so quickly, to Daniel he was speaking in a polite and friendly voice. Asher knew all too well how fake it was, though. Daniel reached out and shook Mr. Burton's hand.

"Lovely to meet you as well, sir- and I agree, Asher is a good kid. I'm glad we finally got to meet after he'd lied for so long about where he was going- much happier that he's with you rather than with some teenage delinquents." Daniel said, and Asher felt an odd strike of pride at how well Daniel adapted to this fake song and dance.

It wasn't that he didn't really think Daniel could do it, but maybe he just thought the man would be too obvious about it or not hide their true intentions.

"Ah yes, apologies to say I condoned it. I simply needed a smart, hard working kid to train, I don't care what his home situation is if he doesn't want me to care." Burton replied.

"All's well that ends well, sir. Anyways, I wanted to ask how well you were holding up after everything. Asher told me your home was burned down?" Daniel asked.

"Oh yes, I knew the maintenance worker did a botched job on one of my rooms. I should have had it dealt with sooner, but fortunately I have another house I am staying at for the time being." Burton replied. Asher zoned out as they continued these somewhat awkward pleasantries, but eventually he sort of remembered the main reason why he was here.

"Hey, dad- do you mind giving me and Mr. Burton a moment to speak alone?" He asked softly, and Daniel nodded a bit.

“Oh, of course- I’ll just go order something from the bar really quickly.” Daniel replied, standing up and smoothing out his suit as he strolled casually out of the room. Asher quickly turned to Burton.

“What about the basement? The subject?” He whispered, leaning in closer to Burton. The man scowled, his hand tightening around his glass of probably some kind of alcohol.

“Gone. Fucking all of it. Every *bit* of research I put into that piece of shit.” Burton hissed, a dangerous look flashing in his eyes.

“Shit- what now?? You said- you said you would be able to recreate it, yes?” Asher asked.

“With my research, maybe. But now that’s all fucking- shit! I’ll need to start over from damn near scratch with a new batch of pathetic orphans.” Burton grumbled, but wasn’t able to say much more as Daniel came back into the room.

Asher didn’t end up eating anything for the rest of lunch, he just kept up heavy smalltalk and kept flashing Daniel some mildly anxious seeming looks whenever Burton wasn’t paying attention.

He felt like such a two-faced asshole, playing two people at once in drastically different ways from one another.

Of course, he *was* a two-faced asshole, but still.

When he and Daniel went home, he just went straight to his room to tell Vesper everything that happened.

That night when dinner was almost ready, Vesper turned to Asher. At the moment they were both just sitting on his bed, Vesper had been reading a book and Asher had been scrolling mindlessly on his phone. He forgot how hard it was to do *anything* in these first few days of starvation- it eventually got easier, though.

“When is dinner?” Vesper asked.

“Probably in twenty minutes or so- I dunno if I want to go out there, though. I’m still kinda full from lunch-” Asher replied. He didn’t look at Vesper, but he could feel Vesper watching him with a piercing gaze.

“Look at me for a second.” Vesper mumbled, shifting a little closer to Asher and putting his book down in front of himself. Asher sighed and

looked over, trying to look nonchalant.

“Why?” He asked, trying to ignore the way he felt like his brain was being picked apart just by Vesper’s gorgeous, unnatural indigo eyes.

“I don’t believe you. You didn’t have anything for lunch today, did you?” Vesper asked. His tone wasn’t accusing, he wasn't trying to upset Asher, he was just stating a fact.

“What? I- of- of course I did, I went out for lunch and–” Vesper cut him off. He did feel bad for lying, really- he just thought this was something so small it wouldn’t matter.

“Asher, you’re not supposed to lie to me. We trust each other, remember?” Vesper said in a firm tone, and Asher sighed as he looked at the ground, feeling a sting of guilt deep in his chest.

“I- I know, I just-...” He trailed off.

“So why haven’t you been eating? Everyone notices, but clearly no one wants to say anything to you.” Vesper remarked, his tone mildly annoyed now. Asher was pretty sure Vesper wasn't annoyed at him, but who else would he be annoyed at?

“Well I- I’m just not-... shit, Vesper- just- drop it- please-” Asher pleaded, fighting to keep tears from welling in his vision. Vesper moved closer to him so they were now basically face to face- the only space between them was Asher’s crossed legs, and Vesper was now sitting on his knees so he was a good bit taller than Asher. Vesper then reached out and held the side of Asher’s face in one of his hands- he seemed to finally realize what a weak spot that was for Asher.

“Is this why you’re so tiny? It’s why you used to feel dizzy, too- you weren’t eating. Why?” He asked, or more like demanded, but somehow sounded so caring in the stern way that he spoke.

“It- it’s just-... I don’t- always deserve to eat-” Asher mumbled, voicing the silent rules he followed for possibly the first time ever out loud.

“... What?” Vesper asked, now sounding confused and a little more concerned.

“Well it’s just- when I was a kid, if I misbehaved, I didn’t get to eat sometimes- and- those were all minor things, so it makes sense for the punishment to match the crime, ya know- so- so when I do things like argue with people or upset someone, I just- I need to remind myself

that I can't be shitty to people I care about. It's hard because I'm just not great in general, so even if I didn't do anything specific that day I just sorta resort to not eating as a default- it makes it easier, too- after a few days I- I don't even feel hungry-" Asher explained quickly, trying to sort of laugh it off as he waved his hands in the air somewhat dramatically.

A few of Vesper's extra limbs loosely coiled around his hands and arms, grasping them gently like a pair of hands would have.

"Asher, that's not okay- you know that, right..?" He asked softly. Asher looked down, but more with his eyes than with his full head since Vesper's hand was still keeping his head from moving much.

"I-... look, Vesper- I- have a very specific way I live, to keep myself in check- I- I hurt too many people when I don't hurt myself- so it's better for me to just- deal with things my own way- it was thrown off a little since you got here, but- I need to get back on track again or I'll hurt you too…" Asher mumbled, feeling Vesper's grip on his arms tighten just a little.

"I'm not letting you starve yourself, or otherwise harm yourself anymore. I don't believe you could be as bad of a person as you think you are- I will not sit by and watch you destroy yourself." Vesper said firmly. He pulled Asher closer to himself by his arms and then hugged him tightly, shifting to free his arms and instead wrapping the tentacles around his torso.

Asher went slightly pink and just sort of melted into Vesper, loosely hugging him back.

"Vesper-..." He started quietly.

"Nope. You are a *good* person, Asher. You said you trust Daniel a lot, maybe ask him about going to therapy or something-" Vesper suggested.

"I've been before, it doesn't really help… it's just awkward- paying some random person to listen to all my problems that I don't even tell my *family* about, all so they can pick apart the way I think as if I haven't done just that a hundred times on my own already. I don't need a middle aged lady telling me what's wrong with me, Vesper-..." Asher mumbled, sounding somewhat bitter.

"Okay, so then not traditional therapy- but there has to be *something* that can help you feel better-" Vesper said softly.

"... Well- talking to Chardy sometimes helps, he has good advice- but- he's just a kid too. I hate bothering him with my issues, he doesn't deserve to deal with my suffering-" He sighed.

"Have you tried asking him if he minds or not?" Vesper asked.

"He'll always just say he doesn't mind, but I know he'd never tell me if he actually does… and it's not- I mean, my ability is useful but- I can't convince anyone to tell me the truth, I can only convince them to tell me what I want to hear- so I just have no way of knowing for sure if he's being truthful…" Asher replied.

"Well- maybe I could help. If I sit with you and your ability doesn't contest mine, I can just make all of us feel very genuine and sincere- then I'll know if he's lying because he'd have to actively fight off my sway on the mood-" Vesper offered. "It's not a one hundred percent thing, but at least we'd have a better idea of how he feels-" He added.

"... I mean, maybe- I just feel a little bad doing that. I don't- like burdening people with my problems anyways. It's so much easier if people ignore my issues and let me deal with them-" Asher replied.

"Nope, absolutely not. Not anymore." Vesper insisted.

"Trust me, Vesper- you'll get to know me better and you'll realize I'm right. Everyone gets fed up with me eventually- it's just a matter of when." Asher mumbled, his voice growing a little more insistent.

Vesper hugged him tighter and slowly ran a hand through his hair. It had been a while since anyone really played with his hair, but he still enjoyed it- even if it took place during a conversation he'd rather not be having. He snuggled against Vesper and hugged him tighter, soon letting his eyes drift shut.

"I won't ever get annoyed with you, okay..? I'll do everything I can to talk to you if there's problems and work things out the right way…" Vesper whispered, his breath tickling the top of Asher's head.

"Okay, Vesper…" Asher murmured, feeling too tired to continue arguing now. Vesper sighed, holding onto Asher for a while before eventually speaking again.

"... So, you need to come eat dinner-" He mumbled softly.
"... Do I..?" Asher asked.

"Yes." He answered, and slowly shifted to mostly let go of Asher and

stand up next to the bed. Only mostly, because he kept two tentacles around Asher like he was going to just disappear if Vesper fully let go.

Asher sighed and walked out with Vesper, who kept the tentacles wrapped around one of his arms as they walked. Honestly, he really didn't mind the feeling of them- it was a little odd at first, but now it felt like something as casual as holding hands.

They both got food and sat at their usual spots, and today Asher was content to sit in silence listening to the others talking and chatting about their days.

Everyone seemed to be in pretty good spirits at the moment, which was nice. He was zoning out pretty heavily when suddenly Chardy's voice cut through his thoughts like a blade.

"So, how did things go with Mr. Burton?" He asked.

"Oh- uh- it went okay. He definitely thinks Vesper is dead-... I'm just uh- running into a little bit of an issue-" Asher mumbled the last bit under his breath, but that was enough to get Lance's attention and essentially silence everyone else, who were all also intrigued but seemed like they were going to mind their business until Lance spoke.

"What issue?" He asked.

"... He- alright, well he'd said before that he would be able to recreate the procedure on someone younger, with his research- but he's talking about finding a new group to start over on now. I have to encourage it, obviously- but I don't- I *can't* watch him mutilate a bunch of children after illegally sourcing them from who knows where. I don't know how to proceed with this, and it's getting out of hand-" He admitted the thought that had been lingering in the back of his mind for some time now. He truly was running out of ideas, and he had to wonder how much more information he could get from Burton that could possibly make all of this worth it in the end.

"... That is troubling… even if you quit, you'd know it was still going on-" Chardy mumbled.

"Exactly- and I just- damnit, I'm open to suggestions right now-" Asher sighed. His hand that he wasn't holding the fork with was under the table, and he felt one of Vesper's extra limbs curl around it with a soft squeeze to comfort him.

“I don’t know how, but we need to get you the fuck out of there some way or another, and preferably soon.” Lance muttered.

“I agree. I’ll start thinking on things and talk it over, but for now I just need you to try and stall okay? Just- don’t let anything major happen for just a few days, alright?” Daniel said softly, clearly trying to calm down the new, nervous tone that the conversation had adopted.

“Okay…” Asher sighed again and went quiet, spending the rest of the dinner in a sullen silence as a few others cautiously started talking about lighter subjects again.

Dead man walking

Chapter Summary

> Alright, a lot happens this chapter so it might be a little fast pace, I apologize. This chapter is a bit of calm before probably the most brutal chapters I'll have in this work, maybe, idk

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For about the next two weeks, Asher started visiting with Burton again as normal- Vesper clearly didn't like the idea of it, but luckily he didn't argue much. He'd also been making sure Asher ate at the very least two meals a day, and Asher was a little quicker to comply with that because whenever he tried to skip meals he would feel even more faint and groggy than he ever had before.

He tried getting Chardy and Vesper to spend time together with him as well, usually just for things like movies or to teach Vesper card games.

He could tell that they were gradually starting to get along better, though- they definitely weren't comfortable being alone with each other yet, but they started sharing smalltalk which was a big step for Vesper, especially, since until now he'd hardly said a word to anyone.

So, things were going relatively well- Calypso had been around a little bit less because of it. But he and Lance were a completely different story- Lance had been avoiding Asher for some time, and being oddly passive aggressive whenever they did talk.

He tried not to think about his issues with Lance, though- especially when he was at work.

Today when he went in, Burton was much more excited and in higher spirits than he had been since the accident. Asher walked into the room and cocked an eyebrow, looking at Burton with a slightly amused expression.

"Hey, what's up?" He asked.

"Well, for one, I've been looking into a new place to set up my lab and new expendables to hire. You already know that, though- but I've got

a promising place I need to visit later. What you don't know is that I also found not one, but *two* promising candidates for my experimentation. They're both under the ages of ten, one of them is just a bird girl, like my last subject- but she is showing signs of time manipulation. The other is a goddamn unicorn boy, but he's able to move things with his mind. I bet with my experimentation we could increase those *dramatically* -! They'll be better than that other brat could ever be, anyways." Burton explained with a grin. Inside, Asher felt his heart drop. He knew Daniel was trying *hard* to find a way to shut down Burton's operation, but Asher knew he was being too soft. He was trying to find ways to put Burton in jail, but the world wouldn't be safe from him if he was just put behind bars.

On the outside, he continued with his act, smirking back at Burton.

"Good, good- where are they, though? How do you know your source is credible?" He inquired.

"They're both overseas at the moment, but yes I have known this man for most of my life. Now, let's get to work- we both need to leave at around noon today to get to the showing of that nice building." Burton said as he flopped down into his seat. Asher sat as well and worked silently with him on their computers until it was time to go.

They left right when they were supposed to, and when they walked outside of Burton's office there was already an all black car with heavily tinted windows waiting for them outside. It was different from the one that usually picked Asher up, but when they got in he saw that it was still the same driver.

He and Burton sat in the backseat, and Burton called who Asher assumed was selling the place they were going to just to let them know that they were on the way to the showing now. The driver stayed very silent and tense, much unlike when it was just he and Asher in the car. Burton must not like smalltalk with his employees.

The drive was about forty minutes, and closer to the end of it they were quite a ways outside of the city. Unlike Burton's old house and lab, this wasn't anywhere it looked like rich people would prefer to stay. There were farms and crop fields all around, including the house they pulled up to. It looked like a nice farmhouse, probably built somewhat recently.

There was a barn on the property, but it was a good bit away. There were trees scattered around, and as they all climbed out of the car

Burton made a comment about needing to plant more trees.

There was already a very nice silver car parked in the long gravel driveway, but they were parked on the very end of it by the house where there was about thirty feet of cement driveway.

A man in a suit was standing near the front door, and he waved over at Burton when he saw the older man. Burton waved back and headed over, quickly followed by Asher. The driver stayed put inside the car, leaving it running quietly.

“Wonderful to finally meet you in person, Mr. Burton. How are you doing today?” The realtor asked, extending a hand to shake Burtons.

“Good to meet you as well, sir. I’m well, but eager to get inside. Could you please tell me and my assistant a little more about the property?” Burton replied.

“Of course, would you two like to come inside?” The realtor asked as he opened the dull red front door. The handle was round and likely initially golden in color but was now very worn with age and use.

“Obviously.” Burton mumbled with a scoff, stepping into the house. Asher looked around a little, staying silent as he listened to the realtor begin to speak.

“The home itself is quite old and has a lengthy history, it was initially built in the late eighteen-hundreds, though it’s been remodeled countless times since then. The initial foundation is all that remains from then. I understand what you’re looking for with the basement, and I assure you, you won’t be disappointed. It was used before as housing for slaves and the disabled relatives the public would’ve done better not to see. Anyways, it has also been upgraded since then- it is a fully finished basement of quite a large size. The last owner of this house was a paranoid man who was sure we’d be bombed, so he heavily reinforced the basement and even started illegally adding a second later to it. When we heard you were interested, we began having them finish that up immediately for you. The whole house has–” The man continued, but Burton cut him off there.

“I don’t want to hear about the house, Jeff. Just tell me about the basement.” He grumbled, clearly frazzling the other man.

“Ah, of course- yes sir. So the basement is about fifteen hundred square feet, not including the second layer. The main room is four-hundred and eighty square feet and it has eight rooms all around one-

twenty, and a nice size bathroom. The space is quite ready for any modifications you'd want to make to it as soon as we sign the contract- ah, and the lower level is unfortunately only two rooms, each at about two-hundred feet. That section of the basement is unfinished unfortunately, but being that it's brand new it should be easy to polish that job off." Jeff explained. Asher watched as Burton seemed so interested- Jeff was leading them down into the basement, but all Asher could think of was what would happen to *children* down here.

The man led them through the entire basement, showing them every room- and in Asher's mind all he could picture was Vesper, in pain as he was repeatedly electrocuted. He couldn't help but wonder how many other people would succumb to that fate if he let this go on. The gears were turning in his head, he just needed to get *more time* .

The tour took about a half an hour in total and they did look at the actual house part a little to make sure the building was sound. Once it was all said and done, Burton seemed quite pleased with the place, but he didn't have the contract sent over quite yet.

The first few minutes of the long car ride back to the city were quiet, until Asher spoke.

"... Mr. Burton?" He said quietly, turning his head slightly to look at the man.

"Hm?" Burton grumbled, glancing up from his phone to Asher.

"I have a suggestion, if you'd like to hear it out." Asher said, barely keeping his voice even and calm.

"Well, go on then." Burton mumbled in annoyance.

"I was to preface by saying I have a very bad feeling about those kids you're looking at right now. This house is a good location, for sure- but it won't be as sturdy as your lab was. You need to *know* that your next subjects will be loyal and obey you. So… what if I'm your next subject?" Asher offered, staring firmly at Burton. The man's eyes narrowed and he watched Asher for a moment, a smirk slowly forming across his face.

"You're a smart kid, I like the way you think. I like it." Burton said, and malice-filled his tone made Asher instantly uneasy, like he was already thinking of all the things he was going to do to Asher.

“Thank you, sir. But- the only thing is that I need to work things out with my family. While we were in there, I was thinking about it- I’ve run away before. I think the best bet would be to wait a few weeks, and while I’m home I’ll cause some issues- that way they won’t even miss me for the first few days that I’m gone. Then, it should be easy enough for you to fake my death, right? I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time, and got hit by a car late one night,” Asher suggested, pushing down the feelings of near panic he was starting to feel. He became hyper-aware of how *trapped* he was in the car, and now in his situation.

He honestly didn't know what he was thinking, doing this. Maybe he was making it up, but he could've sworn the driver kept glancing back at him with the sort of mortified expression you'd expect from someone who *knows* the implications Asher was making.

“Fine, fine. It’ll take me a while to get this property set up, anyways. We’ll discuss the finer details at a later date, once we know more.” Burton looked back down at his phone, effectively ending the conversation. Asher sighed softly and turned to look out the window, lightly scratching the back of one hand with the other.

By the time they got to where Burton always had Asher dropped off, he was ready to just go home and collapse. He walked off the wrong way away from his house until Burton’s car was out of sight, then he jogged back to Daniels building. He hadn’t eaten yet that day, so he was feeling a little extra tired- but now he really *was* too anxious to even think about food.

Heading into the elevator, he went straight upstairs- he didn’t expect to see anyone as he stepped out into the living room, but to his surprise, Chardy, Vesper, and Francis were all sitting in the living room together. Vesper’s head snapped over when he heard the elevator sound, initially looking suspicious before he saw that it was just Asher, and his expression softened a little. He got up and headed over, reaching out to take Asher’s hand with one of his tentacles.

“You’re home early.” He commented softly, his voice sounding almost wispy and a little breathy.

“Yes, Burton was looking at a new house to replace his old lab-” Asher mumbled, trying to be just loud enough for the others to hear. Francis stayed put on the couch, where Asher noticed they’d had a card game of some sort set up. Chardy, on the other hand, got up and headed over to them- discarding his hand of cards on the couch where he’d

previously been sitting.

“Oh no- what’s going to happen?” Chardy asked, his tone going a little high pitched with worry.

“... Well, nothing, yet. He hasn’t found anyone exactly suitable to test on so for now it’s just upgrades to the basement to turn it into exactly what he needs. I’ll try to keep everyone updated on everything new that he tells me- I think he trusts me quite a bit.” Asher answered, trying to ignore the guilty feeling he got for lying about something so big. He’d sealed his own fate, every step he took was another step towards his doom, every second that passed was closer to his last.

He had to try harder to ignore the piercing gaze he felt from Vesper’s deep purple eyes, obviously he’d caught on that Asher wasn’t being entirely truthful.

“Okay, well- good. Remember, if you need to talk about anything you can always talk to me-” Chardy said in a comforting tone, casting a quick glance at Vesper as he turned to reclaim his spot on the couch.

When Asher had first walked in, the mood of the room didn’t really feel *uncomfortable* , just a little uneasy. He was honestly just surprised to see Vesper out of their room, which he was pretty sure Vesper just never planned on moving out of at this point.

Vesper stepped a little closer to Asher, what might be uncomfortably close if Asher didn’t want him to be so close. He stared calmly up into Vesper’s eyes as he felt his extra limb coil higher up around his arm, and Vesper stared back at him with that gaze like he was actively sifting through Asher’s thoughts.

“I’m sure you’re tired.” Vesper mumbled as he suddenly turned and began walking down the hall to the bedrooms, keeping a firm hold on his arm. Asher just followed silently, glancing quickly back at Chardy and Francis. Francis seemed relatively uninterested, but Chardy shot him a small smile right before Asher turned into his room and lost sight of him.

Vesper quietly shut the door behind the two of them and then turned to Asher.

“What *actually* happened?” He asked sternly.

“... Vesper, listen- I wasn’t *lying* with that, it’s just- at the moment, there’s things going on. Things that I feel like would be better if no

one else knew about yet- I- I promise, I don't plan on keeping these secrets for long-" Asher murmured, careful with exactly what words he used so that he wasn't *technically* telling a lie at any point in his explanation.

Vesper watched him for a moment with that firm, calculating expression, but after a bit he just sighed and hugged Asher, the remainder of his extra appendages wrapping and curling around him. Asher *melted* against Vesper as he usually did- clearly it wasn't an issue for Vesper to hold up Asher's weight, and it felt nice for Asher to be basically cradled.

Vesper shifted to sit on the bed, and Asher curled up in his arms, slowly shifting to hug him back. He turned a little to look up at Vesper, only to see that Vesper was already looking back down at him. His expression was almost a bit concerned- he realized Vesper's expressions weren't all that different from each other, but Asher found it easy to learn what every little subtle cue or change meant. Asher offered a small, comforting smile as he tried to push away his worry from earlier.

"Everything's gonna be okay, Vesper- I'm fine-" He whispered, and he felt Vesper sigh, hugging him a little tighter. He didn't verbally respond to Asher, but instead moved to run a hand through his hair. Asher's eyes drifted shut as he leaned into Vesper's hand, feeling his worries temporarily melt away.

Later, he'd have to deal with the consequences of his actions. Later, he would have to find ways to make it so people wouldn't miss him. But right now, he could exist in a state of bliss, even if it was just for a little while.

In the following days, Asher tried to distance himself from everyone a little. It was easy enough to do with basically everyone but Vesper, but he knew his cover would be blown if he tried pushing Vesper away. He tried to keep it all very low profile, as if he hadn't essentially signed away his soul to a devil.

Vesper did still seem suspicious of his intentions, which he expected, but he was typically able to talk himself out of the conversation and change the topic to something else.

Asher wished he could say that they at least talked less, but actually it was more like the opposite, especially after Vesper got his own phone.

Daniel had mentioned getting him one before, but one night after Asher got home from work, Daniel gave him a brand new phone to give to Vesper.

“It’s not the most expensive one out there, but I figured it would be a good first phone for him. It’s still pretty nice, too-” Daniel said, then proceeded to briefly go over some of the features, such as camera quality and how much space it had and whatnot.

“Thanks, Dan. I’ll bring it to him and help him get it set up,” Asher said with a smile, taking the phone and heading back to his room. He knocked before opening the door, as he’d gotten used to doing. When he walked in, Vesper was just sitting on the bed reading a book. He looked over when Asher walked in, shooting him a small smile.

“He, Vesper. Look, Daniel got you your own phone-” Asher said with a smile as he moved to sit next to Vesper. Vesper sat up straighter and set his book down, leaning over Asher to look at the new phone in his hands.

“We’ll have to get you a case for it that you like, but for now just be super careful not to drop it. I figured we could get it set up and everything for you too, oh! Here, I’ll put my phone number in your contacts-” Asher hummed as he turned on the phone and typed in his number, sending himself a short text so he could save Vesper's number in his own phone.

“hi” Was all the message said.

Vesper just watched him for a moment, before Asher handed him the phone.

“Alright, now let’s get your password and everything set up-” Asher said happily. He spent the next hour or so helping Vesper get everything set up, like a password and all the other peoples phone numbers so he could be added to the group chat and everything.

He also found some random games for Vesper that he thought he might like, though he had a feeling that Vesper probably wouldn’t spend that much time on a phone. After that, Vesper did occasionally text him though. He texted with a lot better grammar and punctuation than Asher did, unsurprisingly. Their conversations were mainly just Vesper asking how Asher’s day was going, and when he thought he’d be home. It wasn’t much, but Asher couldn’t help but find it comforting and maybe just a little endearing that Vesper cared enough to ask how he was doing throughout the day, and not just when he got

home. It meant Vesper actually *thought* about him when he wasn't there. Asher started occasionally being the first one to text Vesper, but it was so rare for him to get a second to text when he was with Burton, so really he could only reply to Vesper whenever he got a second.

Now, finally the day came when he received a text from Burton.

"Everything is ready with my new lab. Are you ready?" The man had sent. It was nearly two in the morning, Asher was sitting awake in his bed reading the message with trembling hands. Vesper was deep asleep right next to him, a few of his tentacles were loosely wrapped around Asher's arms.

He sighed and put his phone away, carefully trying to slip away from Vesper. He was a light sleeper though, so it only took a bit of movement for his eyes to squint open as he turned his head over to Asher. He was still in that half asleep state, not quite fully awake.

"Go back to sleep, Vesper- I'll be right back-" He whispered, and Vesper nodded a tiny bit. He let go of Asher as he rolled onto his side and went back to sleep.

Asher used his phone as a dim light source as he made his way out of the room and headed to Chardy's room. He knocked softly, but he was sure Chardy didn't hear the knock because after a bit he didn't get a response. He hesitated a moment before just slowly pushing open the door. It was darker in Chardy's room than it was in Asher's because Chardy kept his curtains completely shut whereas Asher usually kept his open just enough to see the sky.

"Chardy?" He sort of whisper-called out as he carefully navigated over to Chardy's bed. He heard Chardy shift a little, but still didn't get a verbal response.

"Chardy, please wake up-" Asher said a bit louder now that he was fully in Chardy's room and definitely wouldn't be waking anyone else up.

"Huh…?" Chardy mumbled tiredly, and in the darkness Asher could vaguely make out his silhouette sitting up.

"Can- can I talk to you for a second..?" Asher asked softly.

"Oh- sure- here, come sit down-" Chardy replied, instantly sounding more awake as he moved to turn on the small light on his nightstand.

They both cringed a little as it lit up the room. It wasn't like it was that bright, but both of them had adjusted to the dark so even that small light felt nearly painful for the first few seconds.

Asher sighed as he shifted to sit on the bed next to Chardy. He put his phone back into his pocket and seated himself on the very edge of the bed so his feet were still on the floor. He was quickly tapping his fingers against his knees as he frantically tried to figure out how to word what he wanted to say without triggering any alarm bells in Chardy's head.

"What's going on, Asher…?" Chardy asked softly, suddenly sitting right next to Asher.

"... I- wanted to ask you to do something, but- it just sounds, like, really suspicious. I don't- I don't *mean* for it to, but I've just- been awake for the last few hours thinking about it and- I've been really anxious these past few days-" Asher said quickly, feeling his hands begin to shake again. Vesper had still been making sure he was eating whenever he was home, but when he went to work with Burton he never ate there. At least soon enough he wouldn't have to worry about this, since it wouldn't really be his choice to eat or not eat anymore.

"... Okay, what is it?" Chardy sounded slightly concerned, but also understanding as he gently set a hand on Asher's shoulder. Asher forced a small smile over at him, but looked back down at the ground as he began speaking.

"Okay, I'm- I'm worried about Vesper. He's doing good right now, I know he was spending time with you and Francis before, but-... life is just- it's so *fragile* , and I worry about what would happen to him if anything happened to me. I *promise* , Chardy, I'm not going to try to kill myself or anything, but you know- dangerous things happen to people like us all of the time, and I want to make sure everyone I care about will be okay if something were to happen to me. At least for you, and everyone else here there's a built in support system, but Vesper isn't comfortable with anyone else yet. So I just- I wanted to ask if you'd be okay maybe trying to spend some more time with him over the next couple of days…?" Asher asked, his voice growing more quiet as he continued speaking. Again, he was trying to use specific words and phrases so that he wasn't *technically* lying to Chardy. He wasn't really sure when he started caring so much if he actually lied to people or not.

"... Well, I mean, okay? I did actually want to talk to you about

Vesper, though. I just wanted to know if you feel completely safe, because me and the others were talking about it and- I really hate to say this, because obviously Vesper has been through *unimaginable* things and I don't want to villainize him, but I'm still concerned. He makes all of us feel pretty uneasy when he's around, and obviously part of that is likely in his ability, but even when you're around blocking it out now the feeling is still there. It's not that I personally think he'd necessarily do something bad, but it's hard to fully feel comfortable when no one can tell what he's feeling, you know? If you can tell me that you honestly trust him, I'll believe you with no questions asked. He's not done anything wrong or harmful since he's been here, and honestly I'm sure we could chalk up the feeling of unease to him being new, I just want to hear what you have to say about it." Chardy explained, trying to keep his tone soft and gentle as he danced around the topic. Asher looked over at Chardy, slightly confused.

"Oh, I didn't realize you guys felt that way. I find it hard *not* to trust him, honestly- I feel like I can read him like an open book, so I just assumed everyone could. To be fair, he doesn't trust you guys either- the feeling might be mutual, I dunno. But yeah, I do trust him- I hope everyone can learn to as well-" Asher replied.

Truly his mind was boggled. He knew he was better at reading people than the average person, but he thought that pretty much everyone here could do that. Or at least people like Chardy because of how empathetic he was, or Francis because of how calculating. Maybe even Lance, because despite Asher's recent experiences he knew that Lance *could* pay enough attention to things, perhaps it was just that Asher wasn't worth paying that kind of attention to.

Victor, Amelia, and Lucinda he could understand them not reading people so well. It wasn't that they weren't as smart, it's just that they didn't look as closely at things sometimes, and Lucinda was just a little too aloof to read between the lines.

"Alright, then I trust your opinion on him. But as for your request, I will *try* to spend some more time with him. He's very standoffish most of the time, but I'll try inviting him to do more. Maybe he'll be more comfortable if it's just me and him with no one else," Chardy suggested.

"Yeah, maybe. But- thank you, Char- I really appreciate this. I'm gonna go back to bed now, though-" Asher said as he stood up, trying to feel relief at the idea that Vesper shouldn't be totally alone when he

leaves now.

“Of course. Goodnight, Asher-” Chardy said with a small smile. Asher smiled a tiny bit back and walked out of the room, quietly shutting the door behind himself as he left.

Sighing heavily, he pulled out his phone and opened up his chat with Burton.

“I’m ready. Bring me to the lab instead of your office tmrw” He sent back.

He then slipped back into his room, once again using the phone for light as he crawled back into bed. Vesper halfway woke up again and wrapped a few of his tentacles around Asher again- this was quite comforting for the both of them, and Asher sure as fuck needed the comfort to actually fall asleep now instead of anxiously staring up at his ceiling all night.

The next morning, Asher tried to act completely normal as he went about getting ready. He said a quick goodbye to everyone who was just gathering in the kitchen for breakfast, but before he made it into the elevator Daniel spoke.

“Isn’t it sort of early for you to be leaving? Do you at least want to stay for breakfast?” The man offered with a soft smile.

“Nah, Burton wanted me to come in early today, sorry- but- thank you. I-” He paused, hesitating for a moment.

“I love you guys, have a good day-” He said quickly, timing it so that before he could hear any response from anyone the elevator doors were already shut. Asher wasn’t big on showing verbal affection like that, at least when there was more than one individual involved, so he was sure that would seem suspicious.

He left the building in a bit of a rush and just started walking. Burton wasn’t actually sending anyone to pick him up early, he just needed some time alone to clear his head. He gave himself about twenty minutes to just walk around aimlessly before he went to be picked up, and driven to the end of his freedom.

Everything was a blur after that, he knows he made some smalltalk with the driver as he was brought out to the middle of nowhere, and he knows the entire time it felt like a snake was constricting around his chest. He struggled to breathe evenly, and eventually he

recognized the feeling as being some sort of anxiety attack. He supposed that this wasn't entirely like any other time he'd attempted to do something so harmful to himself, so that'd explain why he felt this way at least.

When they finally got to the house, Burton was waiting outside for Asher. Just before Asher opened the door to the car, the driver turned to him with an almost regretful expression. Surely there was no way this guy knew what was about to happen though- surely.

"... Good luck, kid. Goodbye." The man's voice quivered slightly at the end, and Asher could only stare for a moment as the feelings of horror and regret sunk deeper into him.

The longer he dwelled on it, the harder things would be. He didn't respond as he opened the door, and stepped out onto the gravel.

He could feel the driver's eyes on him as he walked up the driveway, but he did his best to ignore it. He couldn't help but feel like the world was so *peaceful* . There were birds chirping, big fluffy clouds drifting peacefully in the sky, and the wind drifted calmly over the new young trees that Burton had hired people to plant around the property. They were bigger than saplings, and needed heavy machinery to move in, but they weren't quite fully grown trees yet.

If he focused hard enough, he could almost forget that this might be the last time he'd ever see the outside again. The last time he'd feel the warm sun on his skin, or the breeze through his hair.

He had to fight to keep tears from welling in his eyes as Burton led him into the house and downstairs into the basement. There had been quite a lot of modifications done. The main area had been turned into an office, with boards and pictures up all over of various things relating to other research done on this topic. The room that Asher would be staying in now had a viewing window like Vesper's old room used to have.

Before Asher fully stepped into the room, he paused for a moment and turned to Burton.

"Sir, may I make a request?" He asked quietly. Burton sighed, but gestured a "go ahead" motion by rolling his hand as if imitating a rolling wheel.

"I would like to request to keep my phone with me. I can block all of my family's phone numbers so they can't contact me or disrupt

anything, but I would just like to have it during downtime. Please?" Asher asked. The man before him paused and seemed to think for a moment.

"No, Asher. Not in these first few days. Perhaps after my initial few days of testing are over, then you may have the phone from time to time. For now, I'll keep it safe with me." Burton eventually answered, then held out his hand to take Asher's phone. Asher hesitated a second before shakily handing it over, holding the power button as he did so that the phone would fully power off. Burton tucked the phone into his pocket, and then shoved Asher into the testing room.

"Now, wait here while I grab a few things. Mkay?" Burton grinned as he shut the door and walked off. Asher quickly looked around the room, fight or flight instincts fighting to take control of his actions. He tried to steady his breathing while he studied the room. It was very similar to Vespers, with just a bed, desk, and chair in the room. There was also a change of clothes there, the exact same kind of clothes that Vesper had, just smaller. He sighed as he went and quickly changed, assuming that was what Burton was wanting him to do.

Would he too end up just like Vesper? Broken, even more distrusting, scarred and mutilated? Perhaps his wings would be ripped or cut off, maybe his tail too. The thought terrified him, everything terrified him.

He waited anxiously, just sitting cross legged on the floor for Burton to come back. He was having a hard time keeping his thoughts straight, but he was pretty sure he sat there for a good while with just his racing thoughts and heart to accompany him.

Chapter End Notes

> Sorry it left off on a bit if a cliffhanger guys, I'll try to post another one tonight but I'm also grieving my last few hours with TikTok rn

Hell on Earth

Chapter Summary

Super brutal chapter :D
Trigger warnings for torture come in now, mainly electrocution and strangulation and general cruelty, handle with caution.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Burton came back into the room, he was carrying a box with him. He set the box down and sat in front of Asher, who was fighting to keep himself seeming calm and content.

“Alright, now I know you volunteered for this, but you must understand that when subjected to these things, your mind tends to try and trick you. So, I’m going to be restraining you from time to time for specific points in my experimentation. First of all, I recreated the shocking device I had on Vesper- it was destroyed in the fire, but its design was simple. I’d like you to put it on, for my safety.” Burton said as he grabbed the collar looking device from the box. He passed it over to Asher, who nodded a little as he took the thing with trembling hands. He clasped it around his neck, cringing at how cold it felt against his skin.

He could feel the short metal prongs digging deeper into his neck. It was uncomfortable, but luckily didn’t seem to be cutting off his ability to breathe too much.

“Very good. Now, as I’m sure you’re aware, when a child is first gaining their ability it can happen quicker due to stress or being in distress. With my previous subject, I was able to strengthen his abilities naturally that way. There was more I did when it came to procedures and cracking open that interesting mind of his, but for now I think this would be a good starting point.” Burton said, turning to look through the box again.

“... Wait- wait what? I thought- I thought it would just be some surgeries, then making sure that I still listen to everything you say?” Asher said quickly, panic seeping into his voice.

“Oh, no. Unfortunately for you, you never asked me about the specific details of what would happen. Now, let’s get started shall we?” Burton smirked as he pulled what basically looked like a very simplistic light gray and black TV remote out of the box.

“Now, I still need you to trust me at the end of all this, so I’ll do you a favor and explain what this does. It controls that little accessory on your neck- I’m glad you didn’t seem to notice that it looks different, because it does have a few extra controls. See, I figured there *must* be easier ways to go about this than what I had to do with Vesper, so I made it all very automated. With this remote, I can shock you, or I can tighten the collar to the point of cutting off airflow. Before I do any of that, though, I’m going to put on a few other pieces of machinery that will measure all of your vitals. I won’t get much progress from you if you’re constantly passing out, plus I can’t risk permanent brain damage. I just need to scare you into becoming a stronger version of yourself. So, let’s get you some breakfast and then we can begin.” Burton said, his tone a little too cheery for the situation as he stood back up and grabbed the box. Asher shuddered to think what else might be in there, and how much pain it would cause him.

He needed to remind himself he deserved the pain, at least some of it.

He just nodded a little and watched Burton step out of the room again. He came back with a bowl of some kind of soup, passing it to Asher.

He was slow to take it, but he was starting to feel hungry. At least right now he was being fed real food.

“I’ve heard that this specifically should prevent fainting. I’m aware you’re quite prone to dizzy spells, we can’t have any of that. I’d hate to taint the experiments with drugs, but if you lose consciousness I may need to invest in something that will force you to stay awake.” The man's voice was low and threatening.

Asher just nodded again, slowly eating his food as if he could procrastinate his way out of this.

“Hurry up, kid.” Burton snapped after five minutes had passed and Asher had barely eaten. He just nodded a little and finished the food as fast as he could, now having a reason to fear Burton's impatience and inevitable anger.

When he was done, Burton took the bowl out of the room and dragged the chair to the middle of it. It was only then that Asher noticed it

wasn't any normal chair, on the armrests and legs it had metal shackle looking things that were clearly meant to close around limbs and keep them locked to the chair. He stiffened up as Burton gestured for him to sit down in said chair.

"... Sir, is- is this really necessary?" He said quickly, forcing a small smile as he tried not to look nervous.

"Yes, it is." Burton replied firmly, clearly not amusing any sort of conversation with him.

"I don't think so, sir- I swear I–" Asher started, but Burton just grabbed the remote and triggered a small shock through the device. It didn't really *hurt* , but it did shock him both literally and figuratively. He stumbled back, his hands instinctively flying up to his next to try and pull the collar away from his skin. Even after the zap had stopped, his skin still felt irritated and tingly.

"Sit. Down." Burton said in a cold tone.

Asher nodded and quickly sat in the chair, forcing himself to sit still as the cold metal was closed around all four of his limbs. There was no specific attachment for his wings, so they were essentially just tied to the back of the chair with a few feet of particularly rough rope. It dug into them and just slightly cut off proper circulation, which would probably cause issues later. As for his long tail, Burton used another rope to tie the end of it to the chair so he could hardly move it.

"Excellent. I'm going to attach the other devices now, so stay put." Burton said with a hum. He grabbed a few things from just outside the room and took some time setting them up. Asher was in such a daze at this point that he wasn't totally sure what everything was, but he had several wires attached to various points on his head and chest. It was all mildly uncomfortable, but that was the least of his worries right now.

When Burton was all finished, he left the room and sat in his office. Asher could see him through the window, looking over a computer screen. He was seeing a side profile of Burton from this angle, so he could see a tiny bit of the screen as well. It was hard to make out most of what he was seeing due to the way the pixels lined up, but he could certainly see a heartbeat monitor and a few other similar things, probably for his brainwaves and oxygen intake or something.

He watched as Burton reached for the remote, which was currently just sitting on the desk. He stiffened up and held his breath, bracing

himself for whatever was going to happen. But Burton just froze in place, his eyes locked on the screen as he simply waited.

Eventually Asher started to relax a little. Maybe Burton had found something that wasn't right and would have to come fix it before he could continue.

Just as Asher's breathing started to relax, Burton pressed a button on the remote. He jerked against the restraints as he was shocked again, but this time it didn't stop. It wasn't severe, but his entire body was still stiff as he kept trying to twist away from the growing source of pain.

Tears slipped down his cheeks as the pain grew, it felt like a hot knife was *stabbing* into his neck, ripping and shredding through his skin. He physically couldn't force his muscles to relax, so now his entire body was tense to the point of aching, like a pulled wire threatening to snap. He cried out from pain as the constant electric pulses surged through his body. *Finally* after what felt like a lifetime, the sensations stopped. He slumped limply against the chair with a whimper, his entire body tingled as he felt like the life had been drained out of him already.

He looked over to Burton again, his eyes still full of tears as he watched the man studying the computer screen, before looking back over at Asher. He moved and pressed a button on his console, and Asher instinctively stiffened even though in his head he *knew* it wasn't the remote that Burton had reached for.

There was a sharp *ding* over what sounded like a speaker in the room.

"Try not to tense up so much, hm? You're messing up your blood flow to your brain." Burton's disappointed voice said over the intercom. Asher nodded slowly, but he didn't really know how to stop himself from spasming like that again.

Before he had much time to dwell on it, he was shocked again. Letting out a yelp of surprise, he tensed once more, and now caught so off guard he kept trying to stand up or lift his arms, do *anything* to get away from this horrible *mind numbing* pain. His wings kept involuntarily straining to spread away from his body. They clearly weren't able to, but he physically couldn't prevent the muscles from contracting. The ropes dug even deeper into his skin, likely drawing blood to the skin beneath the matted fluff.

This time it didn't last as long, thank gods. When it was over it was

like his brain didn't register it. His whole body still tingled, and he managed to convince himself that it was still pain coursing through him. He sobbed and kept trying to pull himself away from the chair, feeling the harsh metal digging into his skin.

His breathing quickened to the point of hyperventilating, only interrupted by those hiccuping sobs as his body frantically tried to regulate itself and allow his mind to go blank so he could find some sort of relief.

Burton didn't let that period last long, however. He kept up this process for what must've been hours, but if someone told Asher it had been several days he'd be inclined to believe them.

Whenever it didn't take too long, Burton would wait until Asher had finally taken a full breath and calmed down as well, so he quickly started to feel like no matter what he couldn't relax. He kept blanking out every time Burton stopped for more than about ten seconds, so when nearly a minute passed with no more pain, he was thoroughly zoned out staring at a wall. At this point he was just waiting for the agony to resume again; he felt like his entire body was on fire right now, and every time his clothes brushed against his body it sent little prickles of pain through the area. Everything just hurt and he wanted to claw off his skin if it would provide any sort of relief. He ached from being as tense as he was for as long as he was, and his face was damp with sweat and tears.

He nearly jumped out of his skin when he heard Burton's voice over the intercom- he hadn't even heard the ding, so he must've been more gone than he realized.

"Just after noon, so I'm going to bring you more food. No real progress yet, we'll have to try a different tactic after lunch." Burton grumbled, sounding somewhat annoyed. Asher gave no verbal or physical response, just stared at Burton with a dull expression, his eyes barely open enough to see him moving around.

Burton came into the room a moment later with more soup like the one he'd had for breakfast, but Asher already felt like he was going to throw up.

His head lolled to the side as he looked up at Burton, developing almost a manic feeling and altering his mannerisms to reflect that. He grinned a pained, wicked grin up at the man.

"I'm not hungry, sir." He mumbled, his voice was raspy. He must've

made more noise than he realized, because it really did feel like his throat had been stabbed.

“Too bad. I’m going to free your hands, it should’ve been long enough now that you shouldn’t be shaking anymore. Eat quickly, I don’t have all day to spend with *you* .” Burton’s voice weaved its way deep into Asher’s mind, echoing around long after the man had stopped talking. He was in such a fog right now that he was starting to lose his grip on reality.

Of *course* Burton didn’t want to spend any more time with Asher, he couldn’t even be in pain right.

“Okay, I’m sorry, sir…” His voice slowly died away as Burton unlocked both of his arms, his brief mania fading as quickly as it had arrived. They felt like jelly as he shakily ate his soup. When he was done, Burton trapped his arms again and left the room, but this time he didn’t just go back to his desk.

Asher relaxed a little, he couldn't see Burton anywhere through the window, but he could still see the remote on the table so for the time being, he could breathe.

He didn’t have a way to tell the time, so he wasn’t sure exactly when Burton came back, but it felt far too soon. He wished Burton had stayed gone for hours, even if it would mean he'd be alone staring at a wall, slowly losing his mind. But unfortunately he didn’t get what he wanted.

Burton sat back at the desk and spoke into the intercom again.

“Take a deep breath, kid. This is going to be a long couple of hours.” He said, his tone sounding particularly cruel now.

Before anything even happened, Asher felt his eyes fill with tears again. He heard a very quiet mechanical whirring sound as Burton clicked a button on the remote again. At first he didn’t notice any differences, but after a few seconds he felt the collar tightening around his throat. His eyes widened and he started to panic a little as he was forced to take much slower breaths.

“Sir, please- Can’t- can’t we just be done for the day? I- I don’t think-it-” He heard his voice start to sound more quiet and strained as he pleaded, but he was finding it harder to talk than it was to breathe. Clearly his cries fell on deaf ears, the device was working agonizingly slowly, so he was just *barely* able to get enough air for at least a solid

minute before it clicked into place and made it so he was barely breathing at all.

That was where he really started to *panic* . His lungs felt like they had been filled with gasoline and set on fire, and his limbs felt heavy as his vision blurred. Every time that he tried to inhale it was like he was choking on the air instead of inhaling it. Somewhere in his mind he knew that didn't make sense, but in his panicked haze he just kept frantically trying to breathe in.

He soon found that he couldn't swallow now either, so he really did start choking after just a matter of seconds. Just as his vision started to go black, he felt the collar suddenly loosen. He gasped, taking in a deep breath, then instantly started coughing.

The feeling of burning was almost like smoking, and now the horrific and painful coughing fit that followed was similar to the one he experienced afterwards, but this one hurt more. His entire body shook painfully as he tried to curl in on himself, and before he could even fully gain his composure he felt the collar begin to tighten again.

"No- nonono, Burton- please just- just give me a second-" His voice slurred as he shook with a hysterical sob, taking quick and frantic breaths in while he still had enough room to do so. It continued until he was just as constricted as before, frantically writhing in his seat as he silently pleaded. He wished he would just pass out or even die, anything to make it *stop* .

This cycle repeated a few more times, loosening the device just enough to let him breathe only to tighten it before he could catch his breath again. He had never felt so completely and entirely *trapped* as he did in that moment, barely able to move as he was relentlessly forced through likely the worst pains he'd ever felt in his entire life.

Perhaps this was how his mother felt, in her final moments. It was nearly impossible to think now, lucidity was a luxury he couldn't afford, but he was pretty sure he was glad no one he loved was here to see this, as he had been there to see what happened to *her* .

One time, Burton let it go on a little too long. His vision had completely blacked out as he panicked, gasping for air and choking on his own spit, but the device didn't release this time. This time, he completely lost consciousness- he wished he was dying, in his last thought. He wished he didn't wake up, but of course he did. He woke up to the feeling of freezing cold water dousing him.

He jerked back and gasped, instant but temporary relief flooding his body as he found that he was able to get a full breath of air for once.

He looked around with wide eyes and saw Burton, towering over him and looking even more annoyed than before. He cringed a little and pressed himself back in his chair, trying to compress his body to appear smaller, as if he could hide in plain sight.

“ *What* are you doing?? How on *Earth* is this not affecting you enough??” Burton snapped.

“I- wh-what-?” He stammered, and immediately regretted opening his mouth. His throat *burned* when he spoke, like he had swallowed sandpaper, and his voice sounded so weak and brittle.

“Damnit!” Burton shouted as he threw the bucket against the wall.

“By now you should’ve done *something* ! I don’t know what the fuck is wrong with your brain.” Burton spat, more of a frustration and less of a question, leaving the room and returning to his desk.

Asher watched with a defeated look as he felt the collar begin to tighten, and the process continued again.

He still had absolutely no grasp on time, but he knew that he’d passed out shortly after Burton stopped, and now when he woke up he found himself completely alone and mostly shrouded in darkness. He wasn’t sure if more water had been poured on him or if it hadn’t been long enough since when he was soaked for him to fully dry off, but all he knew was that he was absolutely fucking freezing, and still wet.

Burton wasn’t anywhere in clear view from the window, and the only light out there was from a small lamp on the man's desk. Letting out a shaky sigh, he realized that he could move his arms away from the chair again. He quickly tried moving his legs, and laughed almost hysterically as he found that he was completely free from the chair. He quickly stumbled to his feet, nearly falling again from the rush of blood to his head.

“Holy shit, holy shit-” He murmured- really, he was sure that if anyone else had been listening they wouldn’t have recognized the strangled sound he’d made as a sad attempt at words, but no one else was here.

The first thing he did was basically fall against the door as he tried to open it, but of course it was locked. He wasn't sure why he expected anything different, honestly.

So instead, still shivering from the cold, he tripped over his own feet to get to the bed. He was having a hard time finding the coordination to move his feet correctly, and for a moment he wondered why Vesper never seemed to have these issues.

Flopping into bed, he felt a sharp pang of pain at the thought of Vesper. He wondered if Vesper was alone now, in their room and worrying about Asher. He hoped Vesper would move on sooner rather than later, and hopefully no one would grieve too much for him. He didn't really know what time it was, but he was sure that by now the others were at least suspecting that something wasn't right.

After zoning out for a minute, his thoughts deeply trapped in thinking about everyone he'd left behind, he realized that there was a blanket on the bed. It was tissue thin, probably just a sheet, but it was the closest thing he'd have to comfort. He curled it around himself and soon passed out again, his entire body still in a great deal of pain from earlier.

He was jerked awake by Burton yanking him out of the bed. He quickly pulled away from the man, temporarily blinded by the bright lights assaulting his tired eyes. He fell hard against the floor and felt a harsh kick to his side, knocking the air out of his lungs.

He wheezed as his eyes began to adjust to the light and he looked up to see Burton.

"Get up and get in the chair." The man spat. He seemed to have some kind of food with him, but Asher had an instinctive feeling that he shouldn't eat it. Weighing his options, he'd rather listen to Burton and experience a day like yesterday than disobey the man and risk something much worse happening.

He shakily got up and slumped into the chair, still finding it hard to control his movements, and trembling in fear of what was to come. He ate the food, barely noticing its flavor or texture- it might've been more soup.

When Asher was done eating, Burton grabbed something off the desk in the room. Asher hadn't even realized that there were things now placed on the desk, but he didn't really have time to figure out what everything was as Burton walked back in front of him and leaned over

him. He was holding a metal contraption that looked like some sort of odd mask.

“You were far too loud yesterday, so I figured this ought to shut you up.” Burton spat as he locked Asher's limbs into place against the chair so he couldn’t fight back.

Despite that, he still tried twisting his head away as Burton lowered the thing towards his face.

After only a second, Burton got frustrated and smacked Asher across the face. He yelped and instinctively tried to bring his hands up to defend himself, but obviously he couldn’t. Burton tossed the mask down with frustration and walked out of the room for a moment, returning with some rope. Asher stiffened and silently pleaded, as if his expression or his tears would convince Burton to stop. If he spoke long enough maybe he could convince the man, but he just *couldn’t* . It felt like something was physically preventing him from speaking as Burton wrapped the rope around his torso and neck, and even more around his limbs.

By the time the man was done, essentially all Asher could do was move his head side to side a little- which didn’t help him get away from the mask this time.

Burton placed it on his face, it was cold and unpleasant as the man secured it uncomfortably tight. It felt like it was digging into his skin, and it made him feel oddly claustrophobic. He just wanted it *off* . He tried twisting his head back away from it, but it didn’t help, only made him feel more *stuck* .

It kept his jaw completely clamped shut, so to breathe through his mouth he would have to inhale sharply through his teeth, and still get enough air around the thick metal part of it that covered the entire lower half of his face. It also made it significantly harder to talk or make noise- not that he was trying to anyway.

Burton just chuckled as he walked out of the room, and picked up the remote.

Today was definitely worse. He could barely move, so when he was electrocuted and his body forcefully stiffened up or spasmed, he ended up with rope burns pretty much all over his body. And even when he could breathe, it didn’t feel normal because of how tightly the ropes were wrapped around his chest so he couldn’t inhale as deeply as his body wanted to. Even when the collar loosened, he still felt like he

was choking because of how little air he could consume.

Burton didn't give him a lunch break today either, just kept forcing him through this torment for what must've been hours with no end in sight. He didn't even allow Asher to pass out, so there really was no relief even just for a second.

Eventually, Burton seemed to grow tired of the constant cycles. He clicked the button to speak over the intercom, but Asher barely heard the sound over his own muffled cries. He felt like he was drowning, it was like he could feel the pressure of water bearing down on him constantly, and the terrifying sensation of not getting enough air to his brain that kept his body in the worst state of fight or flight.

"Alright, we're going to try something a little different now." Burton grumbled as he hit a button on the remote. Asher felt an uncomfortable tremor shoot through him as he felt the device around his neck begin to tighten once more, the prongs digging uncomfortably deep into his neck. Just when he started to feel the real struggle for air, the collar stopped tightening. He still had to gasp and wheeze to get *just* enough air to not pass out. It was a miserable state of being kept just on the edge of too much air to not lose consciousness, but not enough to feel like he wasn't on the verge of passing out still.

He watched with panic as Burton got up from his desk and walked away, leaving him in this perpetual state of misery. He wished he was dead now more than ever. He wished Calypso hadn't interrupted him all those years ago, he wished he'd jumped off of a roof instead of choosing this fate.

Tears slipped down his cheeks as he pathetically sobbed only to jerk back as he was forced to put all of his strength into every little inhale, trying desperately again to loosen the ropes enough to just be able to *shuffle* a little, but he couldn't. He was growing weaker, there was no way he was going to survive this. He just wished his body would give up and let him die already, rather than force him to suffer through this any longer.

More than anything though, he wished he was at home with Vesper right now.

He couldn't think very long on these thoughts. Soon his only thoughts were related to breathing, it took all of his effort to just stay awake and he didn't even *want* to stay awake, but it was like his own mind

wasn’t giving him the choice. He wasn’t just trapped here by Burton, he was trapped here by *himself* .

But then, of course he was. He *chose* to come here, and he *deserved* to be here. He was just finally suffering the true consequences of his actions. He shouldn’t shy away from them now, he knew he deserved this. He knew all of this was just a long time coming, but it had finally caught up to him.

He wasn’t sure how long he was suspended in this state of perpetual terror, but when Burton finally reappeared and stopped it, he decided that they were done for the day and left Asher alone after untying him. The “muzzle” was still attached to him and he didn’t have the energy to get it off. At least now that was the only thing making it harder to breathe.

He didn’t get up from the chair for quite a while after that, just staying limp as he stared blankly up at the ceiling. Every time he moved it was like his own body was too difficult to control, and that scared him.

Certainly he couldn’t take much more of this, *surely* his brain would stop fighting soon and finally let the rest of him fade away. Even breathing now hurt, any kind of movement did, really.

His wings were draped over the back of the chair and the floor, stretched out painfully so, but he couldn't bring himself to lift them close to his back as they usually stayed idly. He could barely even bring himself to keep his eyes open.

He didn’t have access to any mirror or any way to see his reflection, but he was sure his neck was riddled in bruises and probably some kind of burns from the electrocutions. He let out a shaky sigh, the air hissing through the gaps in the metal over his face.

Eventually he did move back over to the bed for another short, restless sleep.

Chapter End Notes

> Also, congrats everyone, if you've read this far then you've now read as many words as are in the average novel!

A safe space

Chapter Summary

> A continuation of last chapter, but also add another trigger for some relative gore but I'm bad at explaining it

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next morning he was woken up the same way as before, with Burton yanking him up. This time he had no energy to panic the way he had before, he just stumbled and slumped against the wall.

His tired eyes were still blurry from sleep, he was barely awake as he stood there. Burton was saying something to him, but he wasn't registering any of it until he was smacked across the face again. He winced, and had it not been for the mask he likely would've made a noise.

He looked up at Burton with teary eyes, keeping his arms pinned to his sides as if he'd forgotten he could freely move them at the moment.

The man glared back down at Asher with disappointment.

"Are you ready to listen now?" Burton asked coldly, and Asher nodded a tiny bit.

"Good. We're doing something different today, come along." He grumbled, grabbing Asher's wrist and essentially dragging him as he walked out of the room. Asher tried to keep up, he really did, but he just couldn't seem to get his legs to move the right way. He tripped and stumbled, but none of that seemed to slow Burton down as he dragged Asher to a different room in the basement.

The next thing Asher knew, he was strapped down to a table that looked somewhat like an operating table. He was trembling, his eyes flitting around frantically as an agonizingly bright light was moved right over his face, forcing tears to his eyes.

From what he could tell before the light blinded him, there didn't

seem to be any surgery tools in the room at least. He was entirely unable to move from leather straps around his limbs and torso, and an uncomfortable headband type thing that kept him from lifting or even just tilting his head at all.

His wings were pinned tightly to his side as well, which was starting to grow nearly painful just to have them there even completely still.

Burton didn't say a word during this entire time setting him up on the table, which also involved attaching more wires and machinery. Most of it was quite similar to what had been set up on him for the last few days, but there was more equipment involved this time.

At some point, he heard the door open. He strained to try and see why, but he couldn't see anything other than that damn light and some of the ceiling behind it. He heard an unfamiliar voice though, it sounded like a man- probably younger than Burton but still over forty. This man and Burton spoke in voices that were a little too quiet for Asher to hear.

It was mostly quiet in the room, but all Asher could hear was the odd white noise that sounded like wind or water rushing past his ears. It sounded almost like it did when he was having a panic attack, but he couldn't really hear his heartbeat as much as he could during those.

After a minute or two of the two men talking, he could tell they were both approaching him. He stiffened a little bit as the light was finally moved away, leaving his vision blurry and spotty as he looked around his field of view. He could see the top of Burton's head, his light gray hair was slightly more unkempt looking than usual. He could also see the face of a man he didn't know. Well, at least part of his face. He was wearing a mask like the ones doctors at the hospital wore, and he had a pair of glasses over his dark brown eyes. The little bit of skin that he could see was slightly wrinkled, and his hair was just beginning to gray as well.

"As I said before, there have been *no* changes. Even during prolonged periods of being under duress there's nothing different in his brain waves at all. I'm wondering if he even has any ability to begin with, or if he's just charismatic." Burton said to the other man, sounding frustrated.

"I see. Can you show me exactly what you've been doing?" The man asked, turning away from Asher and stepping out of sight. Burton followed him, and Asher began to panic once more. He tried tugging

against the straps holding him down, but it was no use. He began to quietly cry as he tried pleading with Burton, but all the noises he made just came out as muffled whimpers as he strained against the table.

It clearly didn't affect either of the other men in the room, as just a second later he felt the sharp sting of electricity pulsing through him. He stiffened even more and jerked back, or he would've, had he been able to move at all. It was hell, his body didn't seem to register that he *couldn't* move, so he kept painfully trying to do anything to get away from the source of pain.

When it stopped this time, his brain felt particularly fuzzy. He was starting to see double-vision as he stared up at the ceiling, feeling like he might throw up.

"So, Dr. Klaus, what do you think?" He heard Burton ask a bit later once he was able to think again. They must've been watching his brain waves or something.

"Hm, I don't know. You said you've been keeping this up for two whole days with *no* changes?" Dr. Klaus asked.

"Yep. Is the method just not effective here? It worked with all of my previous experiments." Burton replied.

"It's possible, but perhaps it could be something else to do with his brain. See, when you aren't actively hurting him he doesn't really do much, does he? His brain is beginning to give up, that's not a good sign. This soon in, he should still have strong self preservation instincts." Klaus explained.

"Well what am I supposed to do about that?" Burton asked, sounding even more annoyed.

"It's hard to tell, but keeping up like this will kill him in a matter of days, if that. Maybe try giving him a reason to *want* to live, hm?" Klaus suggested. His voice sounded like it was fading away, maybe he was leaving the room- or maybe Asher was passing out.

When he opened his eyes and found himself in a completely different place, he figured it must've been the latter.

Now, he was back in the room he'd been staying in. He was laying in bed staring up at the ceiling. Quickly sitting up, he realized he wasn't wearing the mask from before. He frantically looked around the room,

and the first thing he noticed was Burton standing by the door just watching him.

“You’re finally awake. I don’t know how much you heard since you rudely decided to pass out, but congratulations. You have a free day today. I’ve left your phone in here on the desk, but I’m going to tell you right now that I’ve got it set up to tell me if you’re doing anything you shouldn’t. I certainly hope these last few days have not hindered our relationship too much, kid. It’s simply what must be done, you can understand that, can’t you? Someday you’ll thank me for this.” Burton said, his tone sounding almost normal now. Asher watched him for a moment without responding before he turned to look over at the desk.

His phone was sitting on it, but it was far too close to Burton for him to have any desire to move towards it at the moment. Burton just sighed, eventually stepping out of the room when he realized that he wasn’t going to get a response out of Asher.

As soon as the door was fully shut, he jumped up and stumbled to the desk. Grabbing his phone, he powered it back on and basically fell painfully back into his bed.

When it finished restarting and turning on, he was bombarded with the countless messages and calls he’d received after he went missing. He knew he couldn’t reply to any of them, he was sure that Burton had some sort of live time screen recorder so he could see what Asher was doing, but he just wanted to read some of them. He quickly regretted this decision.

He had dozens of messages all spanning wildly in what they were about. Lance had been texting him, basically begging him to come back, Chardy and Vesper both sent several messages on the day Asher had gone missing just asking where he was and what was going on. Everyone in the group had sent him a few texts, but most of them were from those three.

There was also a lot of chatter in the group chat about searching for him, and how none of the hospitals or police stations had heard anything. The most recent message there was only from about fifteen minutes ago, so Burton must’ve not faked Asher’s death yet.

He felt tears prick at the corners of his eyes as he scrolled through the messages, deep regret weaving its way deep into his head.

He also realized that because he had not thought to leave any of the

group chats, Burton could now have complete access to all of that information. He hadn't said anything about it though, so maybe the man simply didn't think to go through those chats.

He couldn't stand to read the messages for very long, he was too tired to cry now. So he just curled up in bed, clutching the single balled up sheet to his chest and playing random idle games. At least now he knew what time it was, and at the moment it was nearly six p.m.

He wondered if Burton would come take the phone at some point, but as time rolled on, he didn't.

Surely Burton couldn't spend the entire night watching Asher's phone. That's when the gears began turning, and the mental argument ensued.

On the one hand, he shouldn't try to leave. If he did manage to find a way out, Burton would kidnap other kids and force them through this as well. But at the same time, he was *scared* . He didn't deserve to feel scared, this was his own choice, but he was fucking terrified. He didn't want to be here, and the idea of knowing what was going to happen tomorrow made his heart drop into the pit of his stomach.

His mind was racing as he started to panic, and a dull pain began to surge through his body as if he was reminding himself how he was going to feel soon.

It was then that he made up his mind. He shut off the phone and set it down beside himself, staring up at the ceiling and doing anything that he could to keep himself awake. Tonight, that something was gently stroking his wings. It stung because of the ropes and straps that had been cutting into his skin, but at this point he was starting to grow used to the feeling of constant pain and discomfort.

He didn't dare touch the phone until he felt like he just couldn't keep his eyes open anymore. When that point hit, he turned it on to just the locked screen to check the time. One in the morning.

Surely Burton wasn't awake now, he likely assumed Asher wasn't either. Trembling, he sat up and unlocked his phone. He opened his chat with Vesper and just stared at the screen for a long while, hesitating until suddenly his fingers flew across the screen as he began quickly typing out a message.

"Vsper im so srry. i thoght i could do it bt i cant" He sent, tears welling in his eyes. Seconds later he saw Vesper begin typing, he must've already

been awake.

“What’s going on? Where did you go?” Vesper sent, and Asher could practically hear the worry that would’ve been in Vesper's voice had they been verbally speaking.

“im at Burtons house bcz i offered to b his next subject. plz tell daniel to come gt me” He sent back, and then hesitated a second before sending another message.

“i dnt want to die here”

“What’s the address?” Vesper sent back. Now Asher was glad he’d paid so much attention the first time he came here, because he had actually memorized the address. He sent it to Vesper, and then tossed his phone back down on the bed. He was *terrified* of the thought that Burton might already know about this conversation, he might be preparing what he was going to do to Asher right now.

He just sat there, trying to control his breathing as he gradually spiraled into a panic attack. He didn’t want to be in pain anymore, he didn’t want to be here.

He didn’t get another text from Vesper, but he kept occasionally checking his phone. He couldn’t sleep now out of fear that Burton would randomly come downstairs, he just wanted to be prepared for anything.

At nearly two in the morning, he heard the door to the lower part of the basement he was in quickly open and close. He froze in place, shaking in fear as he mentally prepared.

Burton had probably checked to see what Asher had done, and was certainly on his way down here now to punish him for it. His mind spiraled to all of the things that the man could do that would be worse than what he was already going through.

His breathing quickened as he covered his mouth with his hands, trying to muffle the sound of his panic. He felt like he was going to pass out from fear and anxiety, even when he lived with his dad he’d never felt this same level of absolute terror.

He heard quiet fumbling outside the door, and internally he braced himself. His nails dug into the already wounded skin on his wrists where the metal had dug into them, but he couldn’t help it- the pain grounded him.

Finally, the door to his chamber swished open and he saw a tall silhouette standing in the dark doorway. There was just enough light that if he squinted, he saw that it actually wasn't Burton at all. It was *Vesper* .

Without even thinking, he launched himself out of bed and towards Vesper. He barely kept himself upright long enough to make it to him before just falling into Vesper's arms. Vesper hugged him tightly to his chest, instantly wrapping a few of his tentacles around Asher. He stiffened a little at first as one of them wrapped around his arm, but he was quick to remind himself that this was *Vesper* .

Vesper didn't say anything as he just clung onto Asher, gently pulling him away from the room, which Asher was quite glad for. Upstairs, outside the basement, Asher could hear another noise now. It sounded like a different door swinging open so hard that it hit the wall.

He jumped a little and gripped onto Vesper's shirt, tears welling in his eyes.

"It's going to be okay… I need you to take a deep breath for me, and go hide somewhere…" Vesper whispered, slowly letting go of Asher. But Asher didn't want him to let go, he didn't want to step even an inch away from Vesper, *his* Vesper, his savior.

He did anyway, of course, because he was told to. Once Vesper turned away from him to face the staircase leading down into their level of the house, he stumbled back a little and ducked down to hide behind the desk. He was able to peer around it just enough to see what was going on, but he was beyond worried for Vesper.

He heard the door slam open and heavy footsteps pounding down the stairs, but after Burton made it to the bottom of the stairs there was a long pause. Asher looked out from his hiding place to see Burton standing there, looking livid and now slightly bewildered as he realized that it was Vesper in his basement.

He couldn't see Vesper's expression, but he could tell how stone cold *angry* he was. It wasn't like Burton's anger, or Lance's anger. It was the sort of silent fury that just took over your mind.

He didn't feel scared of Vesper in that moment, but he was certainly scared of the situation.

"Hello, *Burton* ." Vesper's voice was sharp like the point of a knife. Asher shuddered as he watched Burton's eyes narrow, the man's hand

reaching down to his pocket to grab something.

In a flash, Vesper had shot out two of his extra appendages and wrapped them all the way around Burton's arms up to his shoulders. He pulled the man closer, dangling him up in the air as he kicked and struggled to get away.

“No, that’s not how this is going to work this time.” Vesper hissed, launching Burton into the nearest wall and keeping pinned there. It was like watching a trainwreck, Asher just couldn’t look away no matter how much he wanted to, just like watching his mothers death.

No- not like that. This was different. He never wanted his mother to die, she didn't deserve it, but he could truly say he *wanted* Burton to die.

“Let go of me!” Burton shouted, trying to twist away from Vesper’s firm grip.

“After everything you’ve done, you’re lucky all I’m going to do is kill you.” Vesper’s voice was low and dark as he spoke, taking a step closer to Burton. The older man opened his mouth to say something, but just then Vesper twisted two more of his tentacles together, coiled around each other as they seemed to harden, and then they speared right through Burton’s abdomen, just below his ribs. Burton sputtered and coughed, his eyes wide from shock as blood trickled down his chin from out of the corner of his mouth.

He let out a wheezy groan of pain, trying to physically pull the now completely solid and sharp limbs out of his flesh, but he was far too weak.

“I should leave you here, bleeding out alone. But unlike you, I make sure to get the fucking job done.” Vesper hissed, and Asher could hardly find the words to describe what he witnessed next. He watched as Vesper untwisted the tentacles that were currently still lodged in Burton's chest, drawing a scream of pain out of the man. But Vesper pulled him away from the wall so both appendages were now completely speared through Burton and out the other side of his back. The man gasped painfully as what seemed like gallons of his blood splattered onto the floor.

Asher would be lying if he said this didn’t horrify him and bring back unpleasant memories, but nowhere in his mind did he feel bad for what was happening to Burton.

Asher was finally able to rip his gaze away and just curled up in a ball, hiding his face in his arms as tears began to slip down his cheeks. He could still hear everything, but now it was awfully quiet. He heard what he assumed was Burton's now half dead body being dropped into the floor, and a moment later he heard quiet footsteps come closer to him.

He looked up to see Vesper, with a slightly saddened or possibly guilty expression. He leaned down and offered a hand to Asher, which he quickly took and held onto tightly.

"We're gonna get you home now, okay..?" Vesper murmured comfortingly as he carefully pulled Asher up to his feet. He walked Asher towards the stairs, but tried to keep his body between Asher and Burton so he wouldn't be able to see the horrible, bloody and mangled mess of flesh left behind. He could tell Vesper was intentionally not moving any of his extra limbs anywhere near Asher, likely because most of them were covered in blood.

Asher stumbled quietly behind Vesper, who slowed down enough for Asher to be able to keep up, though Asher ended up needing quite a bit of help getting up the stairs. Once they got upstairs, Vesper had Asher sit on the couch.

"Stay. I'm going to call Daniel to come and get us." Vesper said softly as he stepped away for a moment. Asher watched him anxiously, not wanting to let Vesper out of his sight.

Vesper spoke quietly on the phone for a minute, clearly eager to end the call. Finally when he did, he opened a drawer in the kitchen, momentarily stepping out of Asher's line of sight before returning to his side and sitting on the couch next to him.

"Alright, he's going to be here in about half an hour. Let's work on getting that thing off of you, hm..?" Vesper spoke in a quiet, gentle tone that made Asher feel more at ease. He didn't realize it in the moment, but it was likely that Vesper was using his ability to calm Asher down. He certainly didn't think he'd be this calm after that, but yet here he was.

He looked down at Vesper's hands to see what it was that he had grabbed, and it looked like a key. He didn't care enough to wonder how on earth Vesper knew where the key was, he just tilted his head a little so Vesper could have easier access to the device.

Vesper fiddled with the key for a moment, twisting it inside the metal

collar until it finally came loose. In that moment, Asher felt a rush of relief so intoxicating he just wanted to slump over and pass out right then.

So, he leaned against Vesper, who turned a little to hug him, still keeping his tentacles away. Asher almost wished he wouldn't though, he always felt so much more secure when Vesper hugged him with them.

"Everything will be okay… We'll get you home, and whenever you're ready we can talk about what happened…" Vesper whispered, resting his chin on top of Asher's head.

Asher just nodded a little and closed his eyes, fully relaxing against Vesper. There were so many questions he wanted to ask, so many things he wanted to say, but he just *couldn't* . He couldn't bring himself to talk, so he just sat in silence.

He wasn't able to fall asleep, despite the calming waves washing over him he was still too anxious to fully settle his mind. But after some time, he felt Vesper shift a little and one of his arms slip away from Asher. He shifted a little and noticed it was Vesper checking the time.

"Daniel will be here soon. Are you almost ready to go?" Vesper asked. Asher nodded a bit, but as he did so he seemed to remember the very visible injuries on his neck. He hesitated, bringing a hand up to trace over the tender, painful skin. He winced a little, bringing his hand back down to rest in his lap.

He looked up to notice Vesper watching him with such an *understanding* . He still could never understand what Chardy had said about not being able to understand Vesper's intentions. Those deep purple eyes were so telling, sometimes it felt like Asher could feel Vesper's feelings when he looked at him.

"Hang on, stardust…" He mumbled and shifted away from Asher enough so he could slip off his hoodie.

Asher didn't initially think much of the nickname, but it made him feel oddly bubbly inside.

Vesper was wearing a plain light gray t-shirt underneath, and Asher couldn't help but momentarily notice that Vesper had definitely built up more muscle. It was always a little hard to tell since he tended to wear more loose fitting clothes, but Asher knew he'd been doing simple exercises since he'd gotten more settled in.

Damnit, it felt so nice to think of something, anything other than trying to stay alive and breathe. He was sure the physical fitness of his friend, or how nice the nickname was should all be the very last things on Asher's mind, but they were such a welcome distraction that he didn't care.

He just sort of watched Vesper, very lost in thought as Vesper slipped the hoodie over Asher's head. It was obviously much too big for him, but the hood part of it covered more of his neck, and it was really, really comfortable. He used to take Lance's old clothes when they were kids, but he hadn't done that in quite a while. It was nice to feel that sort of comfort from clothing again.

Vesper then stood up and took Asher's hand, gently pulling him up as well.

They walked slowly out of the house just as Daniel's car was pulling up to the long driveway. He parked the car and jumped out of it, running over to the two of them with a frantic, panicked expression.

"Good gods, what happened?? How did you- are you two okay-??" He asked, his tone was borderline terrified as he looked the two of them over.

"Burton was the reason Asher was missing. But he won't be an issue anymore." Vesper replied. In sharp contrast to just moments ago, Vesper's tone was now much more cold and unfeeling. It didn't bother Asher though, he understood acting a little differently around different people.

"What?! Okay, you two have a lot of explaining to do, but right now we need to get the hell out of here. I'm just- I'm beyond glad to see that you're alive, Asher. We were starting to fear the worst…" Daniel mumbled, looking at Asher with such sincere concern that it made Asher's chest ache.

He looked down at the ground, still unable to summon the words to speak.

"... I can explain everything for him once we get home and he can get some rest." Vesper mumbled, gently nudging Asher towards the car. He felt oddly anxious getting into the back seat, feeling oddly claustrophobic. He hated it, because more than anything he wanted to get the hell out of this place, but now he was hesitating to even fully climb into the car.

“It’s alright, you aren’t trapped in here.” Vesper whispered, softening his tone a little. Asher nodded and sat uncomfortably in the seat, buckling himself in as Daniel and Vesper both got into the car as well.

The car ride home felt like an eternity. He leaned against the car door staring blankly out the window, fiddling with a loose thread on the sleeve of Vesper’s hoodie.

No one else uttered a word until they made it back to Daniel’s place. Daniel shut the car off and opened Asher’s door for him. Vesper quickly walked around the car to stand next to Asher.

“Alright, kid, I’m going to warn you before we go inside. Everyone’s been looking for you, and your brother is a mess- he hasn’t slept and he’s been lashing out earlier today. I didn’t tell anyone what was going on when I left, what would you like me to do?” Daniel asked softly. Asher just looked to Vesper hoping that he’d somehow read his mind and just *know* , even though Asher himself didn’t really have an answer for that question.

“Perhaps go and tell the others that he’s back, but isn’t ready to talk about what happened yet.” Vesper replied. Daniel cast Asher a long glance, like he was waiting for confirmation. Asher was too lost in thought, just sort of gazing off into the distance.

“... Alright, that works for now. It’s late, I’m hoping everyone is mostly asleep right now anyways. I’ll go upstairs, you two wait a few minutes and come up too.” Daniel said gently as he turned to head inside. Vesper nodded and gently grabbed Asher’s hand, leading him inside to wait in the lobby.

Once Daniel was gone, Vesper began speaking softly to Asher.

“When we get upstairs, I’ll need to go clean up. It’ll probably be easier for you to just go in your room and change while I do that-” Vesper said, but paused when he saw Asher quickly shake his head and take a step closer to Vesper.

“... Well, I’m sure you could use a shower too. We’ll both clean up then, and that way we’ll be ready to go to bed at the same time.” Vesper suggested, and Asher nodded a little.

The rest of the night went by very quickly. Daniel made sure no one else was out in the main area to pry and ask questions at least.

When Asher finished showering, he changed right back into Vesper’s

hoodie then went to wait for him in their room. He kept the room dark as he curled up in bed, laying on his side and hugging his knees to his chest. When Vesper came back, he silently slipped into the room and walked over to Asher, sitting on the bed next to him.

“Are you feeling any better..?” He asked softly, and Asher just shrugged a little. His entire body still felt all wobbly and like he didn’t really have full control of his movements, and the injuries around his neck were brutal looking. There were little electric scars that looked sort of like the criss-crossing roots of a tree, and it was all horribly bruised from having something wrapped so tightly around his neck so many times.

“Let’s get you to bed, hm?” Vesper whispered, shifting to lay next to Asher.

Asher instantly moved closer to him and hugged him tightly. Vesper wrapped his arms and tentacles around him as well, carefully running a hand through his still damp hair.

“I’m here for you, Asher. I understand what you’re going through, Burton did the same thing to me years ago when I first went there. The… effects of it wear off eventually, I promise. I’ll be here to help you however you need it, and I hope you’re ready to talk sooner rather than later…” Vesper mumbled, his silky tone and deep voice were beyond comforting at the moment. He just nodded a little, closing his eyes as he snuggled against Vesper. It didn’t take him long to fall asleep snuggled into him.

Chapter End Notes

> I feel like Daniel was way too casual and I don't know how to make him not seem like that, but he's levelheaded so maybe he's just freaking out internally idk

Into the stardust

Chapter Summary

> This chapter had quite a few time-skips and it mostly just angst and some healing/fluff. Although at the end of the chapter two VERY important people are introduced :)
> This is also one of the last chapters of things I have fully written, so that means after I post the next chapter later tonight then I'm essentially going to hit a wall in posting, so chapters might be a few days or even a week or apart depending on how busy I am, but I'll try to keep it consistent! Thank you to everyone who has read this far

The next morning he woke up to the sounds of Lance loudly arguing with someone in the hallway outside. Initially it startled him, he clung onto Vesper a little tighter. Luckily Vesper was already awake and starting gently stroking Asher's wings with a few of his extra limbs to soothe him.

"It's alright, stardust… Lance wants to come and see you, but Daniel has been keeping him away. If you think you're ready for him to come in, just let me know- it'll just be him though, alright?" Vesper said softly, and Asher relaxed a little. He nodded a bit, he did want to see his brother, but the last few times they'd talked they were both being somewhat argumentative. He knew that it was his own fault, he had been intentionally trying to distance himself, but right now he just desperately wanted comfort and not another thing to stress over.

"Okay, are you sure..?" Vesper asked softly. Asher sighed and just nodded again, slowly shifting to sit up. Vesper stood and brushed himself off, heading over to the door and opening it slightly.

"Lance, he's ready to see you now." Vesper said just loud enough for Lance to hear from down the hall.

Asher mentally braced himself and shifted to sit on the edge of his bed, where he noticed Calypso's tail was just disappearing beneath the piece of furniture. He could find her again later, but right now Lance was very quickly walking into the room.

He looked nearly deranged from a lack of sleep, with huge bags under

his eyes and a look of near panic. He instantly ran over to Asher and hugged him tightly. Despite it being a little startling, it was nice, and he quickly hugged Lance back.

“Oh thank fucking god you’re okay-” Lance mumbled. “Okay” was not how Asher would’ve described how he was feeling, but he didn't say anything and just hugged Lance tighter.

Just then, Lance shifted to wrap his wings around Asher. They were glowing particularly bright at the moment, likely due to Lance’s high emotional state, and in Asher’s haze he didn’t really think about the fact that they would still burn him.

The second Lance’s wings made contact with Asher he felt warm, it took only a second for the pain to really kick in. Just because of the surface area, it felt like his *entire body* was being lit ablaze, and in his mind he was launched back into that chair being shocked until he couldn’t *breathe* . His eyes widened as he began to panic, instinctively shoving Lance away as hard as he could. He shifted farther back on the bed in the process, staring up at Lance with a mix of fear and regret. Lance stumbled back, having not expected to be pushed like that. He looked back down at Asher, his expression painted with confusion.

Vesper was quick to shift himself between them. Asher had told Vesper about Lance’s wings, but he had tried to downplay how bad the situation was by phrasing it as Lance’s wings feeling uncomfortably hot, rather than saying that they flat out burned him on contact. But he knew Vesper knew it was worse than that, Vesper had seen the burns frequently left on Asher’s hands.

“Asher- what–?” Lance began to ask, though he seemed like even if Vesper hadn’t cut him off he didn’t even know what question to ask anyway.

“You burned him with your wings.” Vesper replied, his tone firm. Asher internally cringed, he was glad that Vesper didn’t sound angry but he wasn’t happy about his now several years old secret being let out like this. He only began to feel really panicky as he saw Lance’s expression change. It was like he could visibly see the gears turning behind those once comforting soft brown eyes, and suddenly his expression hardened.

“... *What* ??” Lance demanded, stepping to the side so he didn’t have to look around Vesper to see Asher. Tears welled in Asher's eyes as he

hugged his knees to his chest and looked at the ground. All he felt was anxiety and immense *guilt* that stabbed him deep in his gut.

“Why- Asher! Why wouldn’t you tell me-?? How long has that been happening for?! Jesus christ, I just don’t understand- what is *wrong* with you-!? What did I do that makes you feel like you can’t possibly trust–!” Asher froze when he heard Lance say that. A sick, horribly feeling churned inside him. That was something Dexter had said to him when he first tried distancing himself. “What’s wrong with *you* ”, or “What have *I* done”, those words echoed loudly in his head as he began to tremble.

He wanted it to stop, he didn’t want to feel this way anymore. He hated that he could find so many things that Lance said or did so similar to things Dexter had said or done earlier on. He hated thinking that someday Lance could ever *possibly* do anything as horrible as what Dexter had done, but what other conclusion could he possibly come to?

He was honestly glad when Vesper cut Lance off once again.

“ *Stop* . Get out or I will force you out.” Vesper said loudly. He wasn’t shouting, but his voice was so loud and powerful that it felt like it should shake the walls of the room, and it definitely got Lance’s attention.

“Absolutely *not* ! You’ve been here for what, two- three months?? If even that- you do *not* get to tell me to leave *my* brother! In fact, if it weren’t for *you* , none of this would’ve happened-!” Lance shouted, his wings flared up, heating the room up and emitting an even brighter light.

Asher was trying hard not to just start full on sobbing. He was *scared* , he didn’t know of what exactly, but he just wanted everyone to *stop* .

“You no longer have the right to decide what is best for Asher. You constantly sacrifice his well being and feelings if it inconveniences *you* . Everyone here thinks you treat him like a piece of shit, but no one else wants to say anything to you because of *this* . You need to go to anger management, because this is exactly why Asher doesn’t trust you and why you no longer trust him. You’ve *hurt* him and now you’re standing here yelling at him after he’s been through *hell* . You should feel lucky that he even still wants you around after everything you’ve put him through. *Everyone* here knows it but you, because you’re too dense to understand what you’re doing.” Vesper kept a cold,

calculating tone as he said the exact words to break Lance apart, pick apart his mind and point out all the things wrong with it.

Lance initially looked shocked, but that soon shifted right back to red hot rage. He took a step closer to Vesper, getting right up in his face, trying to intimidate him. Vesper crossed his arms and glared down at Lance, clearly not giving the reaction Lance was hoping for. Despite being younger, Vesper was actually taller than Lance by a good few inches.

“Don’t do that shit! You don’t know *anything* about what goes on here, all you do is sit in this room pissing everyone the hell off-! You’re a fucking creep, and all of us wish we could’ve dumped you off somewhere else!” Lance screamed in Vesper’s face, but Vesper still seemed entirely unphased.

“Get out, Lance.” Vesper’s voice became much quieter, which almost felt worse than if he had begun shouting back. His tone took on a much more deep, menacing air- likely from his ability- to it which clearly caught Lance off guard as he finally took a step back. Lance looked over at Asher, his expression softening a little as something inside him seemed to break.

“Asher, I’m sorry kid- I didn’t- I didn’t mean to yell, or to hurt you- please, just- let’s talk about this?” Lance asked, his voice sounded slightly pleading. Asher *knew* that Lance really did feel bad, and part of him wanted to just forgive everything that had happened and hope that fixed it, but at the same time he was still terrified of things becoming worse. The more he forgave people, the worse they would treat him. When he thought about it like that, he remembered again that he *deserved* to be treated poorly. He was in no position to ask that he be treated any better, really.

But he took too long making up his mind, and from the outside it probably looked like he was too far gone to even summon a reaction to what was going on. So Vesper decided for him and took a step closer to Lance, practically standing on the man's toes. Lance glared at Vesper as he tried to shuffle to the side to get around Vesper, but Vesper didn’t allow it and kept himself firmly placed in front of Lance.

“Get *out* . You don’t get to manipulate the answers you want anymore. *If* Asher is ready to talk to you again, I will let you know.” Vesper grumbled, grabbing Lance’s arm and forcibly bringing him towards the door.

“Let go of me you piece of shit!” Lance demanded, but by then Vesper was already shoving Lance out the door and quickly shutting it behind him.

Instantly Vesper’s demeanor changed, his expression softened as he moved closer to Asher. He sat on the bed next to him, but was careful not to get too close or touch him.

“Are you okay..?” He asked softly. Asher just shrugged a little, not looking at him as tears he hadn’t noticed until now continued to slip down his cheeks.

“I’m sorry for raising my voice at him, and I’m sorry it’s going to cause you issues. I can’t stand to watch him get away with everything he is anymore.” Vesper mumbled. Asher just nodded a tiny bit before shifting closer to Vesper, reaching out to grab Vesper’s hand.

Vesper sighed and gently pulled Asher into a hug.

“I- He might be right though… If you had never been told about me, you wouldn’t be hurt right now…” Vesper whispered, his tone sounding oddly shaky. Asher had never heard Vesper sound like this, he usually sounded so strong and sure of what he was saying. Right now he sounded *broken* . Asher shifted to look up at him with wide eyes, feeling immediate concern.

“I don’t want to be the reason you’re hurt, Asher… I don’t want to scare you, either… I know you were scared last night, and I keep telling myself that it was just because of Burton, but I-...” Vesper trailed off, his eyes filling with tears. Asher had never seen him cry before, not like this. Even before when he was witnessing Vesper in pain, he never *cried* .

It sparked something in Asher, he *never* wanted Vesper to feel upset like this. He didn’t want Vesper to think that *any* of this was his fault, as if Vesper hadn’t been the most kind and understanding person for Asher through all of this.

“... I’m not scared of you…” Asher whispered, whatever invisible source that had been keeping him from speaking before was suddenly gone. His voice was very hoarse though, and it was a little painful to speak. Even Vesper seemed surprised as he looked down at Asher, a single tear slipping down his cheek.

“It’s not your fault, either… I don’t blame you for anything that’s happened to me, you’ve helped me so much more than I think you

realize…" Asher continued, speaking softly. Vesper hugged Asher tighter, and Asher noticed that Vesper's hands had begun to shake.

"Oh…" Vesper mumbled. Asher felt *horrible* that Vesper was feeling so bad over something that wasn't *at all* his fault.

"I need you to understand that it's not your fault, dove…" Initially, he was trying to call Vesper either "love" or "dear", because those were both names that Asher's mom had once called him to comfort him, and it had always felt nice. But he sort of mixed up his words, and "dove" came out instead. The nickname still made sense though, and Vesper didn't seem upset by it, so he decided to run with it.

"I wish Lance hadn't gotten so angry with you… I know he feels bad, but-... I was scared of what he was going to do… he sounded a lot like Dexter for a minute-..." Asher murmured, his tone instantly becoming guilty. He hated that his brain was forcing him to relate his own *brother* to a manipulative abuser.

"I won't let Lance hurt you like Dexter has…" Vesper mumbled, and Asher internally cringed.

"... I-... I don't *think* he would, it's just-... the way he acts and everything… I *do* want to talk to him about it, but I don't want to *talk* to anyone… it's so much easier to just stay quiet…" Asher's voice dropped to a whisper.

"I know… but I still want you to feel like you can voice your thoughts. I can keep doing all the talking for you for now, if you want me to, but I still want you to talk to *me* so I can know how you're doing…" Vesper replied softly.

"Okay…" Asher whispered. He hoped he would be able to do that, even now talking with Vesper felt more comforting than he'd probably feel talking to anyone else.

"But… does- does everyone else really wish I wasn't here..?" Vesper asked, his voice crackling a little.

"I-... I don't know… but *I'm* happy you're here… I know Chardy doesn't mind you being here, but I haven't talked to anyone else about you… I-... I guess Chardy said that you make the others nervous, but maybe anyone new would…" Asher replied. He shifted a little so he could run his hand through Vesper's hair, trying to be as comforting as Vesper had been for him.

Vesper sighed and leaned into his hand a little, curling one of his tentacles loosely around Asher's arm. Asher smiled a tiny bit and kept playing with his hair. He might've deserved what Burton was doing to him, but in a selfish way he was *so* glad he was back here with Vesper, even though he knew he'd never be good enough to deserve Vesper's kindness.

Over the next couple of days, Asher was spending about one hundred percent of his time around Vesper. He started to feel nervous whenever Vesper wasn't around, and Vesper was quick to pick up on that so he just tried to be around Asher twenty-four seven. Lance would occasionally try to talk to Asher whenever he was out of his room, which was usually just to get food at this point, but usually it didn't last long before Daniel or Chardy would redirect Lance to something else.

He still didn't talk to anyone but Vesper, he just had that strong feeling preventing him from doing so even when he wanted to talk.

It was nice listening to people talk to him, though. Vesper had explained to Daniel exactly what happened during Asher's time with Burton, so that Daniel could essentially relay the information as well as come up with a coverup when the police eventually began investigating what happened.

Eventually, Asher started to feel a little more comfortable leaving his room more. Today, it was late morning on a Saturday, and everyone was out in the main living area either watching the TV or helping Daniel clean up after breakfast. Asher and Vesper were sitting next to each other, silently watching the television as Victor flipped through some random channels to find something to watch.

Eventually he landed on a news station, and it looked like he was going to skip over it until Burton's face popped up on the screen.

The headlines read *"Semi-famous business-man Jeremy Burton found dead"*

The camera zoomed out of the picture of Burton to show the news station, and a newswoman sitting at a desk with a small stack of papers in her hands.

"Good morning, viewers. Today we have just received the grim news of Mr. Burton's unfortunate passing, although information is currently

very limited. It is seemingly unknown exactly how the man has passed, but police are actively investigating as we speak. We do have several pictures of the crime scene, but viewers be warned, they're not for the faint of heart. We will display those on screen for you now." The woman said, her tone was overly sympathetic to the point of being able to tell how fake she was acting.

The image of Mr. Burton was replaced with several images of the basement he was killed in. Asher stiffened and looked away, diverting his gaze to the wall across the room. He knew the pictures would be horrific, and out of the corner of his eye he could see a lot of red.

Vesper, as well as everyone else in the room, watched the screen silently until the pictures faded off of it and the woman began speaking again, probably about the oncoming investigation or something.

"Holy shit-" Victor mumbled as he turned to look at Vesper, who just stared coldly back.

"Alright, everyone calm down. We all know that the news makes things look worse for all of us, there's no need to overreact." Daniel said as he stepped out of the kitchen and into the living room.

"Yeah, but what the fuck??" Amelia's voice rose as she stood up off the couch.

"He did all that and we're *still* letting him stay here??" Lance spat.

"Let's take a breath, and remember that Vesper isn't the only person here who's killed people." Daniel said softly.

"He probably fucking enjoyed it." Lance mumbled under his breath, but everyone clearly heard it.

"Okay, that's enough of that." Chardy quickly interrupted, but was met with several arguments from Amelia and Victor agreeing with Lance.

Asher may not be able to verbally stand up for Vesper at the moment, but he refused to just sit there listening to this. He abruptly stood up and grabbed Vesper's hand, trying to pull him up as well. Vesper looked slightly confused for a second, but stood up and watched Asher. Asher looked over at Lance and waited for Lance to look back at him to shoot him a glare, then he quickly walked towards the hallway.

As he passed Chardy, he hesitated a second before grabbing Chardy's arm with his other hand, dragging him along as well.

He was silently fuming as he brought both of them to his room and slammed the door shut, then quickly locking it.

"... Are you alright?" Chardy asked softly, and Asher just sighed. He looked over at Vesper, who looked particularly stone-faced.

"I *didn't* enjoy doing it." Vesper muttered.

"... I know, I- I'm sure he doesn't *really* believe that you did, he just- overreacts sometimes-" Chardy mumbled back, sounding like he felt guilty for Lance's actions. Asher knew how that felt.

"He needs to learn to control himself." Vesper shot back with a little more aggression than he seemed to intend.

"Well- I don't disagree. I know-... I know he shouted at you the other day, I want to apologize for that because you really didn't deserve it-" Chardy said quietly.

"You owe me no such apologies." Vesper grumbled back, crossing his arms.

"I know, but I don't think he'll ever apologize for it. I just- want you to know that I'm on your side. If I'm being honest, I didn't trust you either when you first arrived here, but Asher told me that he did. I'm… unsettled, by those pictures, but Daniel's right- you're not the first, or even the second person here to kill someone. It's not like it's gonna be all neat and clean, you know. I appreciate how you stand up for Asher- it can be hard to do it for yourself sometimes, especially when it comes to family members. So I- I'm glad he has you-" Chardy said, his words taking on a much softer tone. It was odd, but Asher couldn't help but feel like there was more going on to what Chardy was saying.

"... Thank you. I'm glad he has you, as well." Vesper replied, somehow seeming like he understood the subtext of what Chardy said.

Asher sort of looked back and forth between the both of them for a moment, but for once, neither of their expressions were very telling.

"I want to shout at him…" He mumbled quietly, sort of accidentally speaking out loud.

“I often feel the same sentiment.” Vesper replied.

Chardy paused before speaking so he could smile softly at Asher.

“I understand, but just remember you can’t fight fire with fire. I think it would be much more productive to sit down and have a conversation, maybe with Daniel there as well. I know he’s been worried about you, we all have- but we’re also trying to give you your space. What happened was… well, obviously it was very traumatic, and some of us are a little more insensitive about that than others, but I promise tensions are just high right now. Things will start to go back to normal soon enough-” Chardy said gently. Asher nodded a little bit, more so hoping that Chardy was right rather than assuming that he was.

“We’ll see. Anyways, I don’t want anyone else coming to talk to Asher for the time being unless it’s you or Daniel. After that little display, I won’t be quick to talk with those three about anything.” Vesper said, his tone finally softening a little.

Asher noticed he hadn’t mentioned Francis anywhere, but it was probably because of the painfully neutral stance that Francis seemed to have on the situation. He never commented on anything when it was being discussed openly, and when he was actually pressed about it he just gave very vague answers from what Asher had heard.

“Alright, I’ll let Daniel know. Let me know if either of you needs anything, okay?” Chardy said with a soft smile before he slipped out of the room. Vesper sighed and moved to sit on the edge of the bed.

Asher hesitated before moving to sit next to him, leaning against him a little.

They continued to spend most of their time together, and gradually Calypso began spending more time around as well. Vesper seemed to really enjoy the little dragon's company, but she still wasn’t around all that often. Asher couldn't help but wonder why, maybe she just didn't feel like dealing with him and his issues anymore, even if that was her job.

Chardy did end up being right, things started to settle down after that. Asher could only assume it was because Daniel had spoken with everyone and basically told them to relax because Vesper really didn’t do anything wrong.

Daniel did end up explaining to Vesper and Asher that to ensure Vesper wasn't punished for what happened, he had on paper become an official part of Daniel's group. Because of that, he ended up agreeing to begin training to actually work on the field eventually.

Asher had been temporarily exempt from training, which was still ongoing even weeks later when he was starting to do better. He still found it hard to talk sometimes, and now he was having minor issues with coordination and other basic motor functions.

Luckily Vesper helped talk him through it a lot. Asher seemed to have been electrocuted with a higher voltage than Vesper, but it was still a lot of the same longer term symptoms.

At least now he could actually walk in a straight line, so the worst of the side-effects were starting to ease up.

Chardy had started spending a bit more time around both Vesper and Asher, who were really only separated whenever Vesper had to train with Daniel. Lance seemed like he wanted to apologize, but pretty much refused to talk to Asher with Vesper looming around, and Asher refused to talk to Lance without the comfort of Vesper's presence.

Asher had also recently been plagued with much worse nightmares than he ever used to have. He always had occasional nightmares, mainly about his parents or Dexter, but now it was so much *worse* . In his nightmares now he was usually back in the basement being tortured, or feeling an even worse panic than he usually did while being forced to relive other traumatic events.

Now, it was late one evening nearly a month after Asher had initially gone to Burton's place. He was laying in bed with Vesper just scrolling through TikTok on his phone.

He was laying on his side, and Vesper was laying right behind him with his arm wrapped around Asher, just watching the screen over Asher's shoulder. Vesper had a few of his tentacles wrapped around Asher's limbs as well, and overall Asher felt very comfortable and secure like this.

They had already eaten dinner, so now they were just settling down for the night, though both of them usually stayed up pretty late.

"Hey Asher?" Vesper spoke after a while. Because of the position his head was in, he was essentially just speaking softly right into Asher's ear, which made him flush a very light shade of pink, for some

reason.

“Yeah?” He asked quietly, pausing the video they had been mindlessly watching.

“I heard of something recently, and I was wondering if you might be interested in trying it? I know you don’t want to do traditional therapy, but I feel like something needs to be done to help you.” Vesper asked, keeping his tone gentle and trying to make it clear that he didn’t want to push Asher to do anything.

“... Okay- what is it?” Asher asked, shifting to roll over so he could look at Vesper. They were a little bit farther apart now because before Vesper’s chest had been pressed against Asher’s back, but now there was a little more space so that Asher could actually look at Vesper.

“Have you heard of exposure therapy?” Vesper replied, and Asher instantly got nervous.

“... Yes- I- I have-” Asher mumbled.

“Okay, well, I didn’t realize it at the time but I actually did something like that to myself a few years ago. Burton… he didn’t always use electrocution, one thing that he used to do was whip me and the other kids, who were still there at the time. Even when he stopped I had a hard time with objects touching anywhere on my body, so what I used to do was intentionally touch things that felt like a whip against different parts of my body. It eventually did help a little, but I feel like it might help you now because you wouldn’t be doing it alone in your room after being screamed at.” Vesper explained, and Asher thought on it for a moment.

“... Okay, what exactly did you want to try then?” He relaxed a little now. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust Vesper or thought that Vesper would do something to harm him, but the idea of being pushed out of his comfort-zone was still nerve-wracking.

“I wanted to start with something small, can I just touch your neck? Obviously we’ll never want to do anything like actually put something completely around your neck or electrocute you, but I’ve heard that reliving small bits of traumatic events from a place of safety and comfort, your brain can reassociate different feelings with those bad memories and make them easier to deal with.” Vesper replied softly.

“... Oh- I- I guess that makes sense. You- we can try it, go ahead-” Asher muttered. He still felt nervous, but he trusted Vesper, and right

now he was willing to try just about anything.

He shifted a little bit so it would be easier for Vesper to touch his neck, pushing his head into the pillow. Vesper moved his hand, trying to stay within Asher's relatively clear view of sight. Asher tried to focus on keeping himself calm, steadying his shaky breathing as Vesper lightly caressed the still healing skin where Asher had been burned by the shocking device. It didn't hurt anymore, but the skin wasn't fully healed over yet. He'd probably have some pretty nasty scars there forever, just like Vesper.

Surprisingly, Asher didn't really feel much of a panicked reaction when Vesper touched him.

"Alright, is it okay if I grab your wrist?" Vesper asked quietly. He hesitated a second before nodding, watching as Vesper wrapped one of his tentacles around Asher's wrist.

That got to him a little, he instinctively tensed up as he felt the combination of something touching his neck and "trapping" his wrist. Vesper completely froze all movements, not moving his hand on Asher's neck anymore, but he didn't pull it away either.

"Breathe, you're safe, and we can stop whenever you want…" Vesper whispered, and Asher nodded a little. He let out a heavy sigh, forcing his muscles to relax. Vesper still didn't move, so they both just stayed like that for a while until Asher had calmed down.

"Okay… I- I think it might be helping, but- can we stop for now..?" He asked quietly, and instantly Vesper let go of his wrist and moved away from his neck.

"You don't have to ask me, stardust- just tell me whenever you want to stop something. I think consistency is good, so maybe just every night for a few minutes before bed we can try that, and just see if it works?" Vesper suggested, shifting to hug Asher again. Asher nodded a little as he buried his face in Vesper's shoulder.

"That sounds good… I think I'm ready for bed now, though…" Asher replied.

"It's a little earlier than usual, are you sure?" Vesper asked.

"Mhm- I've been feeling so tired lately…" He mumbled.

"Probably because of the nightmares…" Vesper said with a sigh,

running a hand through Asher's hair.

So, over the next couple of weeks Vesper and Asher continued repeating that process until Asher got more and more comfortable. It was honestly starting to help, he felt less generally anxious and his nightmares started lessening. It would be a long road to permanent recovery, but for now this was a good start. He still had some issues with coordination though, but Daniel started helping with that by essentially doing physical therapy for him.

He still didn't spend a lot of time around Lance, Victor or Amelia much, trying to seem like he was giving them the cold shoulder as much as possible. Essentially he was just trying to reflect energy without using words, so he had a neutral opinion on Francis, but he was being more friendly with Chardy and Daniel. Obviously he was still much closer with Vesper, but it was just easier with someone who understood him and his experiences so well.

Of course Chardy understood things relating to his mental health well too, having gone through a lot of it as well, and that's why Asher was comfortable enough to spend more time with him and occasionally speak whenever Vesper was also around.

One day when everyone was called out of their rooms for dinner, Daniel had told them that he had an announcement to make whenever everyone was ready. So at the end of dinner, but before anyone got up, Daniel spoke.

"Alright, now before everyone gets up, I'd like to let everyone know something quite important." Daniel said, then waited a second to make sure that everyone was paying attention.

"I spoke with Melinda earlier today, and she has referred two new teens to me. Both of them are bats, but both of them have unique abilities. One of them can change his voice to perfectly match others, or even create entirely new voices. The other has telekinesis. They're not brothers, but they do come from the same place. They were both placed in foster care when they were young and were mistakenly paired as brothers, so they have grown up together. They'll be arriving tomorrow afternoon, can I trust everyone to be on their best behavior?" Daniel explained.

Everyone pretty much mumbled their agreement, but Chardy seemed oddly excited by the idea of having new members.

The next day came, and Asher was waiting with Vesper out in the

living room. He just had an odd feeling about this, and wanted to be there when the newcomers arrived. Daniel had gone to pick them up from Melinda's house just as he had with Asher, once upon a time.

He, Vesper and Chardy were sitting on the couch watching a random movie, while everyone else was out doing something or just in their rooms. Asher snapped his head over to look at the elevator when he heard the familiar *ding* of it arriving on the floor they were on.

The elevator doors slid open, and Daniel stepped out followed by two other's.

The first kid looked around Vesper's age, he had long blonde hair and somewhat pale green eyes. He was around average height, maybe a little shorter, and he looked pretty nervous as he looked around.

The second one was a little shorter, and looked closer to Asher's age. He had fluffy black hair, or maybe it was just a very dark shade of brown. He had coffee brown eyes and darker skin than the other kid, though both of them had relatively light skin.

"Alright, Samson and Theodore, I'll show you both your rooms just down the hall. These three are Chardy, Vesper, and Asher-" Daniel said as he gestured to the three of them sitting on the couch. Chardy instantly got up to go and greet them, but Asher hung back. He couldn't get over an odd, uncomfortable feeling he had as soon as those two stepped into the room.

"Hello, it's wonderful to meet you two!" Chardy said happily, shaking both of their hands. The taller kid was very hesitant, but he smiled in what seemed like it was supposed to be in a sweet way as he silently shook Chardy's hand. The shorter kid was pretty eager though, and happily greeted Chardy in return before peering around him to address Asher and Vesper as well as Chardy.

"Hi, I'm so glad to be here. It's wonderful to meet all of you," He said with a similar, oddly sweet smile to the first one.

Asher crossed his arms and just watched silently.

"What's your name?" Vesper asked in a gruff voice, and Asher could tell that Daniel was mildly displeased with their introductions.

"I'm Theodore, I can change my voice to match others. This is Samson, he's got telekinesis." Theodore replied. Samson waved awkwardly over at them.

“Well, we’re all glad to have you here. I hope that you’ll adjust well, being able to alter your voice is such a unique ability-” Chardy interjected, his tone a little *too* happy.

Asher tuned out of whatever smalltalk continued from there. He just couldn’t get over the way both Samson and Theodore *looked* at him, and the way everyone else in the room started acting so differently.

Asher stood up and slipped off to his room, avoiding eye contact with Daniel, who watched him go. Vesper was quick to get up and follow Asher.

The second the door was shut, Asher looked at Vesper for any signs of *anything* , any confirmation that Vesper was sharing his thoughts on these two newcomers, but he saw *nothing* in the man's face.

“Did- did you get that weird feeling too?” He asked quietly, and Vesper looked slightly confused.

“What weird feeling?” Vesper replied.

“... I don’t know, something just doesn’t feel right.” Asher mumbled.

“About what? Those two new people?” Vesper asked.

“Yeah, it just felt *off* .” Asher muttered.

“I thought everything seemed normal, but I’ll keep my eye out.” Vesper replied, trying to use a more calm tone to relax Asher.

“... Okay.”

Not quite right

Chapter Summary

> Spooky scary bat children make Asher irrationally angry, and in turn everyone else is irrationally angry at Asher. Some cute fluff at the end, trigger warning for mentioned self-harm/suicide attempts, etc.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

And all of the sudden, Asher stopped feeling comfortable around the common areas of their living place. Everything just felt a little off now, especially around Theodore and Samson. Chardy had been acting weird too, even more so when Theodore was around. Overall everyone else seemed to be taking such a liking to the two newcomers except for Asher. It was almost like he was feeling an uncanny valley feeling just looking at them, and it made his skin crawl.

It was causing him to overthink a lot more, because after meals or time spent around them he would go and ask Vesper if he'd noticed any of the things that Asher had, and he never did. It was starting to make him feel particularly paranoid, which set back a lot of his

progress with learning to relax more.

He started to think he was going crazy, losing his mind. This group was not quick to trust, he was sure they still didn't trust Vesper, and yet everyone was so open and accepting to the two bat hybrids. They were never alone, those two. Someone was always hanging out with them, laughing with them, just spending quality time together.

Vesper did notice how Asher felt, even if he didn't notice all the same odd things Asher did. And so he started being more attentive to Asher's mood. Whenever anything felt off with Asher, Vesper was quick to find an excuse to leave the situation and go with him elsewhere.

This evening, Asher was pacing back and forth in his room after having dinner with everyone. Vesper was sitting on the bed watching him with concern as he rambled about all the things Theodore and

Samson did that didn't seem right.

"And did you *see* the way that Theodore looked over at me when he said Samson was quiet? It was just for a second, but I *swear* that meant something. And the way that he spoke over Chardy when Chardy was talking about that story with his sister, and no one said anything?? That was so fucking rude of him! No one even batted an eye-" Asher muttered, watching the ground as he just walked in the same back and forth pattern.

"Asher, please take a breath-" Vesper said softly, standing up and going over to Asher. He gently wrapped his arms around Asher to stop him and just hugged Asher against his chest.

"It's driving me *insane* , Vesper- I can't- I just *don't understand* -" Asher replied.

"I know, I know- but doing this isn't going to figure it out, alright? Maybe try talking to Chardy?" Vesper suggested.

"... Yeah- yeah, actually, I think I'll go do that now-" Asher replied, suddenly sounding a little more hopeful.

"Okay… want me to come with you?" Vesper asked.

"Yes please-" Asher replied after hesitating for a moment.

"Alright, but before we go I need you to take a deep breath. You can't just go in there and instantly start accusing people of things, you know Chardy likes to defend everyone's side until they can speak for themselves." Vesper said, not yet letting go of Asher. He sighed, but nodded a little. He knew Vesper was right, so he took a moment to relax before they left their room and went to Chardy's.

The door was already cracked open, so Asher pushed it a little more open so that Chardy could see them standing there. He stiffened a little bit as he noticed Theodore and Chardy sitting on Chardy's bed, seemingly talking about something. Chardy seemed to be having a good time, he was laughing and smiling as Theodore seemed to be recounting some story.

Theodore noticed Asher and Vesper before Chardy did, so Chardy only noticed when Theodore stopped talking and suddenly looked over.

"Oh, hey guys. What's up?" Chardy asked with a bright smile. Asher suddenly felt his throat go dry, looking over to Vesper for help.

“Asher would like to speak with you.” Vesper said, speaking for Asher.

“... Okay? Well, come on in, then-” Chardy replied, sounding oddly confused. Asher had been talking a little more around Chardy, but Chardy *knew* that Asher wasn’t comfortable talking around pretty much anyone else yet.

“I believe he wishes to speak with you alone.” Vesper clarified, and Chardy sighed.

“Ah, okay. Sorry Theo, would you mind just stepping out for a moment?” Chardy asked softly. Chardy had used to talk to Asher like that.

“Oh, of course! I’ll be right back, I need to get some water anyways-” Theodore said with a hum, seeming unbothered as he jumped up to slip out of the room. Asher stepped all the way inside, and Vesper went to follow him, but when he did Chardy gave them an odd look. “Alone?” Chardy asked, and Asher felt like something was tightening around his chest. Chardy was acting so *different* , and it was making him anxious. He looked over at Vesper, nodding to let him know that he could leave. Vesper looked a little worried, but he stepped out and shut the door behind himself.

Asher slowly stepped over to the bed and sat down, carefully avoiding where Theodore had been sitting, which he now realized was particularly close to Chardy. It felt like he was avoiding germs from a sick person, the way he didn't even want to *touch* anything Theodore had.

“So, what’s up?” Chardy asked, his voice returning to sound a little more normal now.

“... I wanted- to ask you about Theodore and Samson-” Asher mumbled, looking closely at Chardy’s face for a reaction from him.

“What about them?” Chardy looked oddly suspicious, suspicious of *Asher* , which felt wrong.

“What- do you think of them? I just have this really strange feeling when they’re around, I don’t like it.” Asher replied, his voice still quiet as if someone could be listening in.

“Well, I wonder why- they’re both so lovely, really. I enjoy spending time with both them-” Chardy said, his tone felt oddly happy.

"... Yeah, I don't know. They've only been here a few days though, so maybe just- be careful? Best not to trust new people so quickly." He muttered.

"You trusted Vesper this fast." Chardy shot back, suddenly defensive.

"Well- that's different, I knew him before that-" Asher scrambled to reply, clearly caught off guard.

"But the rest of us didn't-" Chardy remarked.

"And most of you *still* don't trust him-" Asher raised his voice a little, finding himself truly frustrated with Chardy for possibly the first time ever.

"Well, I hate to say it but perhaps if he weren't so defensive all the time, we would all trust him-" Chardy retaliated. Asher just stared at him for a moment with disbelief, before he just stood up and walked towards the door. He heard Chardy sigh behind him, then stand up.

"Asher, wait- I didn't mean it like that-" Chardy mumbled, but Asher flung the door open and quickly walked out. It felt like his whole world was flipping upside down, nothing was right anymore. This was all just *wrong* .

He didn't go back to his room though, instead he headed to the elevator. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he registered that Lance- who was out in the living room at the time- had asked where Asher was going, but he didn't even attempt to answer.

He hit the button to close the elevator doors, and at the last second as he did that Vesper slipped into the enclosed space with him. He hadn't even realized that Vesper was following him until just then.

"Hey, what happened? Are you okay-?" Vesper asked softly, and Asher just shook his head a little.

Vesper nodded, and they both stood in silence until the elevator brought them down to the ground floor. As soon as the doors reopened, Asher quickly walked out and left the building, Vesper following close behind.

He wasn't really sure where he was going, it just needed to be somewhere that wasn't here. So he walked aimlessly, taking completely random turns and alleyways until he had no clue where he was. The freezing winter air began to take its effect quite quickly,

even though he was wearing long sleeves his sweater still wasn't thick enough for this kind of weather.

Vesper had remained silent for a while, still just following Asher- luckily there weren't really any people out after dark, because if there had been then Vesper's appearance certainly would've gotten the cops called on them.

"Asher, please tell me what's going on-" Vesper said eventually, carefully grabbing Asher's wrist to stop him from walking. Asher turned back to Vesper, his breaths were shaky as he tried to gather his thoughts.

"... I don't- I don't *know* - Chardy's like a completely different person, I don't know what's going on-" Asher mumbled, his voice shaking.

"What happened when you spoke with him?" Vesper asked quietly.

"He- he was just being *weird* , and said I should trust Theodore and Samson because I trusted you, and he just- it felt like an argument, and I've *never* argued with Chardy-" Asher explained quickly.

"... Okay, maybe he was having an off day. Let's just- take a breath, and try to calm down, alright? And most of all let's get inside somewhere-" Vesper mumbled, then hesitated a moment. "You know I don't want to demean your feelings, but I think there's a good chance you just aren't in a good headspace right now. I agree, Chardy was acting strange, but I'm just worried that your mind is making it seem like it's bigger and scarier than it is. We will get through whatever is okay on, okay?"

"... Right- right, okay-" Asher murmured after a moment, looking around. What Vesper was saying made sense, but right now he didn't want to unpack the thought that he could just be in some sort of manic episode.

After a moment, he realized that they happened to be near Burton's old office. Without saying anything, he began walking again, this time with a little more purpose. Vesper followed him, not asking any questions just yet. When they got to Burton's office building, he saw that all the lights were off and the door seemed to be locked. But he knew the building well, so he headed around the side of it and found the door that the janitors used to get to the dumpsters at the back of the building quicker.

"... Asher, where are we?" Vesper asked before Asher could try to

open the door.

"... Burton's office-" Asher replied, not looking at Vesper.

"Why are we here?"

"Because- it'll be warm, and- there's something else I want to do while we're here." Asher replied, then turned to push open the door. He was almost a little surprised to find that this one hadn't been locked, so they were able to get inside.

Vesper naturally seemed much more on edge as they headed up to Burton's office, and Asher could understand why. It was pretty eerie, but he knew that everyone should be long gone right now. There were cameras in the office, but all of that footage was accessible through Burton's computer, where Asher could simply delete the footage of them coming in and disable the cameras. Burton specifically did that because he often did sketchy things that he'd rather not have on camera, unless he was the only person with access to those recordings.

Asher wasn't surprised to see that everything was still kept relatively the same. The media hasn't moved on from Burton's death yet, as the police were pretending there was still an ongoing investigation. Plus, most likely someone would just step in to take Burton's place in the company and everything business-wise would stay exactly the same.

Once they got to Burton's office, he headed into the room and flicked on the light. Everything seemed to be left just as it was still, so no one must've stepped in for him yet. He sat down at the computer- he wasn't positive what Burton's passcode might be, but he'd seen the man type it out so many times just out of the corner of his eye that he knew how many characters it was, and a pretty good guess for where each character was on the keyboard in order. It took him a few tries, but he eventually got it right and now had access to pretty much anything and everything on Burton's devices.

Vesper stood behind Asher, watching everything closely for a while before speaking again.

"What are you going to do?" He asked.

"I'm gonna download everything I can onto a flashdrive, so we'll know who he was working with. There's too many people in this world like Burton, and if I can find out which ones were working with him then I can give that information to Daniel." Asher answered, then began

opening the drawers on Burton's desk to look for a flashdrive he could use.

Once he downloaded pretty much everything that he could, he dealt with the camera footage and then turned to Vesper.

"Ready to go now?" He asked, feeling a little bit better now, certainly less freaked out.

Vesper was just about to respond, when suddenly Asher's phone rang. He jumped a little and quickly pulled it out of his pocket, hesitating when he saw that it was Lance who had called him.

Lance *never* called, he usually texted if he needed something. Plus, Asher felt oddly inclined to answer, so he did and put the phone on speaker.

"Oh, Asher, are you there?" Lance asked from the other end. Asher spoke almost before he could even think about it, which was odd because he still struggled so much talking to Lance face to face.

"Yeah?" He said quietly, and there was a brief pause.

"It's nice to hear your voice again…" Lance mumbled, possibly assuming the phone wouldn't pick it up well enough for Asher to hear.

"Um- but, I just wanted to check in on you. You seemed really upset when you left, and then Chardy was saying something about your conversation- about Theodore and Samson. I just- wanted to see if we could maybe talk about it? I guess-... if- if you *need* Vesper to be there, then I won't be an ass about it- please just- come home?" Lance asked quickly, his tone sounded more sad than Asher had heard him sound in quite some time.

"... O-okay- I'll- we'll be home in a bit-" Asher muttered back, and he felt Vesper carefully wrap a tentacle around his arm.

"Okay- alright, thank you- I'll- I'll see you later, then-" Lance sounded oddly relieved.

"Mhm- bye-" Asher's voice grew quieter as he said his goodbye, then hung up. He leaned back in his chair so he could look up at Vesper, who was looking back down at him with a soft smile.

"I'm proud of you, stardust-" Vesper whispered, and Asher couldn't

help but smile back.

“Thanks… anyways uh- I guess let’s get going, just in case anyone saw us come in-” Asher said with a sigh, quickly pushing himself up out of the chair. He tried to leave everything just about exactly how they’d left it, and then they left the same way they had come in.

Then, they headed home. Asher decided he wouldn’t tell anyone about the flash drive yet, it was getting quite late anyways and he was sure just about everyone would be in bed by now.

As soon as the elevator doors opened, they were shrouded in relative darkness except for some light coming from the windows, and the faint illumination of Lance’s wings from where he sat on the couch.

He was quick to stand up and walk over to them.

“Hey, welcome back- come on, is my room a good place to talk?” Lance asked, seeming somewhat urgent. Asher just nodded a little and grabbed Vesper’s hand, then they all three headed into Lance’s room.

He watched as Lance shut and locked the door behind them, then pulled out the office chair he kept at his desk, gesturing for Asher to sit down.

Asher had always found an odd comfort in Lance’s room, it was decorated with posters from various different bands, and overall had a bit of an edgy vibe to it. He hesitated a moment before shifting to sit in the chair, and Lance sat on the edge of his bed. Vesper stayed standing near the door.

“Okay- I just- wanted to start by saying I’m- I’m sorry, for the things I said about Vesper, and for being so distant with you. I-... Have started going to a therapist a few weeks ago, because- I don’t want to keep pushing you away, Asher. You’re my brother, and I still love you-” Lance began, his tone softening.

Asher tried not to make it obvious how much that got to him, how he already had to fight back tears, and how his hands shook. He just nodded a little bit, trying to summon the courage to speak.

“... ‘m sorry too-” He mumbled, hoping that would get the message across well enough.
Lance just nodded a bit and looked at the ground for a moment, seemingly gathering his thoughts before speaking again.

“So… what did you and Chardy talk about?” He asked.

“... I- told him something felt off with Theodore and Samson, and I didn’t trust them. He seemed annoyed and brought up things about Vesper, and he- he was acting so different… everyone has been, and something doesn’t feel right about this but- but even Vesper says he doesn’t think anything is off about them-” Asher explained, and it felt like word vomit where he was just spitting everything out at once. He hated when he did that. Lance listened quietly though, and only spoke when Asher was done talking.

“...Theodore and Samson? What do you mean- what's wrong about them?” Lance asked, sounding oddly like he hadn't thought that was what this conversation would be about, which was startling because he had mentioned it in the phone call.

“.... That's- they’re what me and Chardy talked about, and argued over. I don't trust them, and I dont get why everyone else does.” Asher crossed his arms, quickly beginning to feel that defensive, argumentative shield take place again as it had every time he tried to open up with Lance recently.

Lance hesitated a moment, he seemed uncertain which was just so odd for him.

“I don’t understand why you don’t trust them, and Chardy doesn't either- that's why he said–” Lance cut himself off, a brief look of panic flashing through his eyes before he started to back-track. “He- he was acting a little strange, I will say that, okay. But I sort of understand where he’s coming from-”

Asher watched him, his eyes narrowing. His chest felt tight, he didn't want to talk anymore. It felt almost hard to get enough air in his lungs, he wanted this to be over, but unfortunately he couldn't will things like that.

“What did he say?” Asher demanded, trying to keep his shaky voice firm and stable.

“... What?” Lance sounded caught off guard. Asher was even more worried now, no one seemed to be acting normal anymore.

“You said Chardy said something, what did he say?” Asher asked again, but Lance looked hesitant.

“... I don’t- think that I should tell you, honestly-” Lance muttered

eventually. “He said it out of frustration, everyone says things they don't mean sometimes.”

Once again Asher paused, feeling his heart drop to his stomach. What had Chardy said about Asher that was so bad Lance didn't want to repeat it?

“Please, Lance- I just-... I need to know-” Asher asked softly.

“.... Asher-... I don’t- want this chipping away at your self esteem- I don’t want- I don’t want to find you in a state like you were that night-...” Lance mumbled, looking at the ground.

Internally, Asher cringed a little. For all the things he had talked to Vesper about, his self harm or suicide attempts was not one of them. It was lightly implied maybe, but they never talked deeply about it. He could feel the stare from Vesper though, and he knew he’d likely have to explain a lot of things later.

He hadn’t attempted anything serious in over a year now, but he had still been minorly self harming pretty consistently. He didn’t starve himself anymore because Vesper wouldn’t allow it, but he could still do this. It wasn’t even like he really thought about it anymore, it was just a compulsive thing, and it’s not like anyone ever saw his arms.

“... You- you won’t- things are different now, I swear- even if I don’t really have Chardy to talk to anymore…” Asher murmured, his chest tightening with an odd feeling of grief.

“... Okay- it wasn’t- anything big, he just- he said he was annoyed- not that you were *annoying* , but just that he was annoyed- and he said you were being a *little* ridiculous. I didn’t- say anything to stand up for you at the time because I had no clue what the context was or what happened, but obviously it shocked me- I would’ve *never* thought I’d hear those things from Chardy. He usually speaks so highly of you…” Lance said quietly, clearly trying to soften the blow and twist what Chardy really said. Asher just nodded, trying to keep his oddly heartbroken feelings to himself.

“... Okay… thank you- I um- I want to go to my room now…” Asher mumbled, standing up.

“Alright… goodnight, Asher-” Lance mumbled, glancing over to Vesper.

“... Actually, I would like to have a word with Lance alone really

quickly.” Vesper said, which caught Asher off guard a little. Asher just nodded a little and stepped out of the room, but obviously he stayed close enough to the now closed door to be able to hear their conversation.

“What do you want, Vesper?” Lance asked, instantly sounding a little tired and annoyed.

“I need you to keep Chardy away from Asher if he’s going to act like that. I like Chardy, but I don’t like what his behavior is doing to Asher right now, and I don’t want him apologizing just to not change behavior. I was hoping you would agree and help make sure they aren’t around the house together often.” Vesper said, his voice sounded so defensive.

“... Okay, sure. You’re with Asher all the time, though.” Lance muttered, clearly even more annoyed now.

“You’re his brother, that’s a void I’ll never replace. It’d be nice if you would start acting like one.” Vesper snapped back, and Asher quickly walked away as he heard Vesper’s footsteps nearing the door.

Asher was quick enough to make it seem like he was just waiting in the doorway to his own room by the time Vesper had opened the door and was within his line of sight. He shut the door behind himself and headed over to Asher, looking slightly annoyed himself.

“What was that about?” Asher asked, trying to play dumb as he shut the door behind Vesper and went to sit in bed.

“I know you were listening, Asher- I just wanted to hear what he’d have to say if he didn’t know that.” Vesper replied, shooting him a quick smirk.

“... Oh- well- my bad-” Asher mumbled somewhat awkwardly.

“Mhm, anyways, I think we have something else we need to talk about, don’t we?” Vesper asked, his tone softening. Asher sighed, his shoulders slumping as his gaze drifted to the floor.

“Yeah, I guess so-” He muttered, moving to sit next to Vesper.

“What did Lance mean by what he said?” Vesper asked, wrapping a few tentacles around Asher’s arm and torso. Asher sighed again and hesitated a while, trying to figure out exactly what to say.

"... Well- it was a while ago, like maybe a year or something- but one night I was just- having a rough time, and- I mean you've seen it, I tend to scratch my hands and arms when I panic. Well- they were bleeding and- Lance thought it was worse than it was, and he got worried- but when he was helping me clean up, he sorta… well I've got some scars, and he just- he saw them and I guess it freaked him out or something-" Asher began his explanation relatively calmly, but gradually reverted to awkward mumbling by the end.

"... What kind of scars?" Vesper asked, his tone shifting to sound darker now. Asher could tell he wasn't angry, but he knew he sounded upset.

"... Vesper-...." Asher he mumbled, sounding reluctant.

"Stardust, please just answer my questions…" Vesper replied, crossing his arms, his tentacles subconsciously tightening around Asher a little.

"I- they're scars from- from mostly knives- I- look, I've had a lot of issues, you know. I didn't- I *don't* have the best ways of dealing with it, and so- so a lot of what I do is pretty self destructive-" Asher said quietly. It wasn't like he was proud of the fact that he hurt himself, it was just another way to punish himself that got a little out of control sometimes.

"... Oh…" Vesper muttered, and Asher just couldn't bring himself to look up at Vesper.

"... so… if you have any questions, I uh-... I'll answer 'em…" He whispered.

"Do you still do it?" Vesper asked immediately.

"... Sometimes-..." He whispered.

"Why?"

"I don't- I don't really know… just- just kinda do it-..." Asher replied quietly.

"... Well- not anymore." Vesper said firmly, shifting to wrap his arms around Asher. Asher just sort of blankly nodded and slumped against Vesper, suddenly feeling incredibly tired. "I… I'm going to keep you safe, always. I don't want you to be hurt, no matter what it's from. I'm sorry I never noticed before… I should have known you were not

alright whenever you've harmed yourself, I'm sure you didn't just act normal after…"

Asher winced slightly, feeling a crushing weight on him. He hated that Vesper felt like any of what Asher did was his fault, and he hated that Asher was still directly causing Vesper to be unhappy.

"Please don't apologize… it's my fault, dove… it's what I do to myself, and I've gotten really good at hiding it… I'm sorry… I wont-... I'll try not to hide things like that anymore…" Asher whispered, tears welling in his eyes. Everything was just far too emotional tonight, and he was so *tired* .

"Please do try, and know that I am *so* proud of you… I'm always here for you, no matter what… you can tell me anything, always, and I won't be disappointed with you for having issues… I want to *help* you…" Vesper replied, gently running a hand through Asher's hair.

Asher just nodded a bit, feeling himself go more limp as the energy drained from him. Vesper silently laid down with him, keeping Asher cradled gently against him as he kept stroking Asher's hair.

"Goodnight, my stardust…" Vesper whispered as Asher's eyes drifted shut.

Chapter End Notes

> Forgot to add this when I first posted the chapter, but this is now the last chapter that I had already written, so it's going to take a lot more time between chapters now. Also, I'm sorry if my writing style has changed a lot, but I'm trying to keep it mostly the same!

Poison in the air, poison in my mind

Chapter Summary

> Asher and Samson talk, and then Asher gets a long string of very good (bad) ideas :D
> I had some fun with this one, definitely didn't foreshadow with the chapter title at all, nope

The next day, Asher did his best to avoid Chardy, who seemed to be spending quite a lot of his time with Theodore. Over breakfast Daniel had said something about beginning to train Samson and Theodore for missions, so he had assumed that was where Samson was all day, considering both him and Daniel weren't around after breakfast.

Lance was making an effort to be around Asher more though, despite the pointed glares that Victor and Amelia kept giving Vesper.

At the moment, Asher, Vesper, and Lance were all sitting on the couch talking idly about a movie that was on earlier. Asher was only basically whispering, it was all he could really manage. He definitely didn't want Chardy or Theodore to hear him talking, even if it was just about a movie.

Chardy, Theodore, and Francis were all sitting at the table playing a card game and Amelia and Victor had just left to go somewhere unspecified, they had both been clearly annoyed when they left though.

Asher was trying to discreetly spy on specifically Theodore, but he got an odd feeling that Theodore *knew* he was being watched.

"I'll be right back, I'm gonna grab something-" Asher whispered and stood up.

"Okay, I think I'll turn on something else to watch." Lance replied, and Vesper just gave a small nod.

Asher walked off to his room, but just as he opened the door he felt a hand on his shoulder. He jumped and spun around, shoving the arm attached to said hand. He knew it wasn't Vesper or Lance, he would've heard them following him.

To his shock, when he turned around he saw Samson standing before him with an oddly calm expression that made Asher uneasy.

“Relax, can we talk?” Samson asked quietly, giving a small, eerie smile. Alarm bells were going off in Asher’s head, but at the same time he had an odd feeling that whatever Samson was wanting to say was important. So without a word, he stepped back into his room and gestured for Samson to follow him, then he shut the door the second Samson was in the room.

He just looked at Samson expectantly, as the older boy smiled a little.

“Thank you. You know, you’re really smart, Asher. But Theo is smart too, and he knows what you’re thinking.” Samson mumbled, his voice suddenly taking on a much darker tone. Asher should’ve felt even more uneasy when he said that, but something in Samsons voice just somehow didn’t trigger as threatening.

“I know you’re not big on talking, but you outta change that soon or you’ll never fix it. You can’t stop him, but at least you won’t have to go down with him.” Samson continued, but it wasn’t clear exactly what or who he was talking about. Maybe it was about Chardy and Theodore.

“I don’t- understand-” Asher muttered.

“I know! Isn’t it great? It’s like a guessing game, but I can’t tell you anything more! That’s all the clues you get, for now.” Samson grinned, his tone suddenly changing back to be overly cheery. Without another word he stepped back out of the room, leaving Asher even more confused and worried.

He quickly grabbed his phone, which was what he had gone to get to begin with, then he rejoined Vesper and Lance on the couch. He clearly wasn’t being secretive enough, because even oblivious Lance seemed to notice that something wasn’t right.

When Vesper began quietly asking what was wrong, he sighed and began typing on his phone. He made a group chat with just the three of them so he could tell them what happened without needing to speak.

“Samson cornered me a sec ago, he ws being vague and saying sm rlly creepy stuff abt Theodore” Asher quickly typed and sent. As soon as Vesper and Lance read the message, they both began typing as well.

“What do you mean? What did he say exactly?” Vesper asked, then scanned the room for where Samson was. Unfortunately he wasn’t anywhere within sight of them at the moment. Lance stopped typing and seemed to be waiting for Asher to reply.

“He clled me smart bt also said Theodore is smart, and knws what im thinking” Asher send back.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Lance sent.

“Idk, but I’m planning to find out ” Asher quickly replied, then stood up. He gave one last glance back at the three people at the table, only to be startled by Theodore downright glaring at him, in stark comparison to Francis and Chardy who were just playing their card game as normal, oblivious to Theodore. He shuddered as he quickly scurried off to his room, of course followed by both Vesper and Lance.

He had been hoping they wouldn’t follow, but it was too late for that now.

“What are you going to do?” Lance asked the second they were all in Asher’s room.

“... I don’t think I should tell you, quite frankly-” Asher mumbled in response.

“Why not? What is it?” Vesper asked, and Asher sighed.

“Lance, when me and Vesper left, we went back to Burton’s office. I was able to get into the computer and found information on the people that Burton had been working with, and–” Asher began, but Lance spoke over him.

“Nope, absolutely not. I already know where this is going and I *do not* approve.” Lance said firmly, crossing his arms.

“Well that’s why I didn’t want to tell you, because I’m gonna fucking do it anyways.” Asher shot back, glaring up at Lance.

“Why is it that when you *finally* decide to talk, it’s just to argue with me and shit on some new traumatized kids??” Lance snapped.

“Because we *all* know there’s something more going on here! Forgive me, but I refuse to watch this place go to shit because you’re all fucking stupid.” Asher spat, turning away from Lance and walking over to his closet.

“You two both stop. Asher, please finish telling us your idea.” Vesper interjected, his tone firm.

“... Fine. I’m going to look at that list and reach out to them, it won’t be weird because I was working so closely under Burton. I’m gonna see just what I can find out about Theodore and Samson- surely they’re on *someone’s* radar, in some system somewhere, I just have to find where. Plus, in the process I can gather some verbal proof of what they did, which will probably help later when I release the information to the public.” Asher explained.

“Hang on, what? No- you need to tell Daniel about this. He’ll have a better way of going about it than sending a sixteen year old into such obvious danger. Besides, it’d do more good to give the information to the people Daniel works with within the government.” Lance protested.

“Nah, with these kinds of slippery people, you can’t hand over information to greased palms. If *everyone* knows what they’ve done, they’re forced to be held accountable. If a few anonymous men upstairs know, this information will never find its way out and everyone gets to keep being shitty.” Asher muttered, now digging through a box in his closet for where he’d hidden the flashdrive. Calypso popped out of a small pile of clothes, holding the drive in his mouth.

“Aw, thanks Cal-” Asher gave a soft smile as he took the little device from her as she chittered.

“I don’t like it. Why can’t you ever just *start* by telling Daniel something?” Lance asked, his tone harsh.

“Because even he’s *obviously* been tricked by them! Anyways if you’ll quit complaining, I was actually planning on asking for your help- from both of you.” Asher picked up Calypso and set her on his shoulder as he stood up and turned around back to the two others, holding the little black flash drive in his other hand. Lance looked mildly annoyed, but Asher could see the curiosity underneath. Meanwhile, Vesper looked as cold as always whenever anyone else was around.

“Fine then. What do you need?” Lance asked with an exasperated sigh.

“Well, for one I need a driver- but also I need someone there who won’t freak them out. I definitely don’t want to meet these guys completely alone, so basically I need you to pretend to be a hired

bodyguard or something, and then Vesper can be waiting somewhere nearby in case anything goes seriously wrong." Asher replied, and Lance sighed.

"Great, at least I'd get to be there that way." He muttered.

"Yeah, but you can't just speak out ya know, it's gonna be a lot of rich old men. Just let me do all the talking no matter what, and we all know we'll both get out of there just fine." Asher said, trying to make himself sound stern as he essentially prepared to boss around his ragey older brother. It was nice to once again have something to focus on, even if it was entirely not the right thing to fix his mind onto.

He was sure this was stupid, and he probably seemed like a maniac. He had been so quiet and nervous for *weeks* and now all of the sudden sounded like he just had his shit together.

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever. When do you want to do that, anyways? I have a lot of plans with Dexter, but for this I can find excuses." Lance muttered, and instantly Asher felt annoyed.

"Oh, *thank* you *so* much for your *brave* sacrifice." Asher mumbled sarcastically.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Lance shot back.

" *Stop* . I think it's time to end this conversation. If you really do want to do this, then Asher you'll need to get to researching anyway." Vesper snapped, his tone cold. Lance just sighed in annoyance and mumbled something under his breath as he turned and abruptly walked out.

Asher just flopped down on his bed and grabbed his laptop. He'd had it for a few months now, but he rarely used it for anything other than watching movies. Inserting the flash drive, he waited for it to download everything. Vesper sat next to him and watched the loading bar slowly fill up.

"Looks like this might take a minute." Asher mumbled.

"Do you have any ideas for who to go to first?" Vesper asked, and Asher let out a shaky sigh.

"Yes, I do. There was… I think there was a doctor, when I was stuck with Burton. Not a normal one- I can't- I don't remember much of their conversation or what he said, but I know his last name and I'm

hoping that'll be enough." He replied, trying to keep his tone from sounding as anxious as he felt.

"I see. But Theodore and Samson don't seem like they'd had any… modifications." Vesper muttered.

"You're right, they don't- but I have a feeling that at least Samsons abilities would be highly sought after if anyone were to find out." Asher responded, and after that they both sat in silence for a moment.

"…. I've actually been meaning to ask you something, Asher." Vesper slowly began.

"… What is it?" Asher asked as he glanced over at Vesper, who suddenly looked concerned.

"You went through... all of that- for a few days, the same way that I did. But- from what I've seen, your abilities haven't gotten any stronger." Vesper phrased it more as a statement than anything else, but Asher knew what he was trying to get at.

"… Yeah, I don't- I don't really understand. Burton was getting annoyed because I guess nothing was showing up differently in my brain like it was supposed to- it's why he brought in the doctor. I don't… I can't remember everything super well, but I think essentially I'm too suicidal for threatening my life to alter my brain-" Asher mumbled with a little awkward chuckle.

"Oh…" Vesper murmured, and Asher internally cringed a little. Vesper shifted to hug Asher, wrapping his arms around his waist and several tentacles around his limbs and wings. Asher sighed and leaned into him, shifting his laptop off of his lap and down onto the mattress so he could curl into Vesper.

"I'm not-... I haven't like- *done* anything, I think I just… I don't know, maybe my will to live isn't strong enough or something… But I'm not- I'm not *trying* to die…" Asher said quietly.

"Okay…" Vesper whispered, hugging Asher a little tighter. Neither of them knew what to say after that.

Over the course of the next two days, Asher began researching and looking into everything he could find on "Dr. Klaus" which, as it turns out, was actually just a stage name. Finding the man's real identity

was the most difficult part, but once he figured that out he was able to find an address. He found out that his real name was Liam Howard, he had a wife and two daughters, and a job as a real doctor in a hospital in a city about an hour away.

It became like an *obsession* , he barely ate or slept unless it was at his computer. He only talked to Lance and Vesper, who were both clearly worried but still covered for Asher, apparently pretending to everyone else that he was sick and bedridden.

He'd done some research on a few others too, but mainly he was gathering intel on Liam, learning his schedule and everything so he'd know exactly when to strike.

Finally, when he was ready, he went to confirm the details with Lance and Vesper. They all hid in Asher's room to talk, as was quite usual lately.

"I think I've got enough information now on Dr. Klaus, I know where to find him. I just need help getting to the city, and someone to be there in case he tries anything." Asher explained.

"I just want to ask again, are you *positive* that this is a good idea? We could give all of this information to Daniel and he'd be *happy* to go and deal with this guy for you-" Lance asked, sounding oddly nervous.

"I'm completely positive, okay? I don't want to leave this up to someone else to do." Asher said, his tone firm.

"Alright, fine. When are you wanting to go then?" Lance mumbled with a sigh.

"Tomorrow, at noon. He should be going somewhere for his lunch break, I can corner him outside of his work." Asher replied instantly, maybe sounding a little too eager.

"In broad daylight like that? I don't know if that's a good idea-" Lance sounded hesitant. Asher was going to argue, but realistically he was sure that Lance was right. Most likely several other coworkers would be leaving with Klaus, and Asher certainly couldn't just accuse him of child torture right in front of everyone like that.

"... We'll just trail him, and see where he goes then. I'll wear something to cover my face so he won't recognize me. I know I said I wanted Lance to be with me, but I think maybe he ought to just wait

in the car or somewhere nearby with Vesper at first, until I can figure out what approach to take. Maybe we can use a hand gesture too, like if I wave my hand around too much then it means I need backup-" Asher suggested.

"Is he armed?" Vesper asked, his tone sounding oddly distant.

"Not that I've seen, he's a cocky asshole. I doubt he'd think he needs weapons, but I guess it's better not to overestimate people." He replied. He wasn't sure when he thought he'd learned so much about Liam, to say something about his personality with such confidence.

"So we'll get you a knife to bring with you, but you have to give it back to me as *soon* as you're back in the car. Deal?" Lance said with an air of finality.

"Deal, thanks. I just have to figure out what to actually say to him now, maybe something incriminating so I can record it like I did with Burton." Asher said, and Vesper nodded in agreement.

"Sounds good. See ya later, kid." Lance mumbled as he shuffled to leave the room.

"Don't call me kid-" Asher called after him, but the door was shut again before Lance responded, if he did at all.

It was the night before his meeting with Klaus, and Asher was laying restlessly in bed. Vesper was asleep beside him, a few of his extra limbs curled loosely around Asher's arms and legs.

His mind was racing, as it had been ever since talking with Lance and Vesper. He *knew* there was something he should do, something he *wanted* to do, but he wasn't sure how Lance and Vesper would respond. He wasn't totally sure how he felt about the whole situation anymore, it was starting to become difficult to think.

Gently shifting away from Vesper, he climbed out of bed and quietly headed to the door. He paused before leaving the room to make sure Vesper was still asleep, watching his faintly outlined silhouette in the dark room. His chest was still rising and falling in an even rhythm, though it was somewhat hard to tell since Vesper was lying on his side.

Sighing, he stepped out of the room and began walking down the hall.

He was nearly at the elevator now when he paused, something wasn't quite right.

Turning his head to the side, he spotted Chardy standing in the kitchen with a cup of water, staring back at Asher with a sort of deer-in-the-headlights look.

"... Oh, hey," Asher mumbled, his tone somewhat surprised.

"Hey, uh- what're you doing up?" Chardy asked. It wasn't that he sounded exactly *suspicious* of Asher, but like he could just tell something was off. Asher was hesitant before answering, things had been so tense around Chardy for what felt like ages now. Maybe Asher's absence for the past bit of time would make Chardy forget how much Asher annoyed him, for a little bit anyway.

"I couldn't sleep." He spoke softly, then paused for a second. "Do you wanna go on a walk with me?"

"... Sure, let's go. I wasn't able to sleep very well either anyways," Chardy replied, offering a small smile. He seemed oddly normal compared to the last few times they had spoken.

They both headed downstairs in relative silence. There was an almost painful chill in the air, as there usually was this time of year. When they left the building, most of the street lights were shrouded in a thin veil of fog, providing an eerie sense to the mostly empty city blocks.

Asher picked a direction and began numbly walking, Chardy by his side.

"So… what's up?" Chardy eventually asked, cutting through the silence like a hot knife.

"Oh, I've just… got a lot on my mind." Asher mumbled hesitantly. He wanted so badly to confide in Chardy with his internal struggles, but at the same time he didn't want to bring another person into this. Especially not Chardy, sure that Chardy would talk to Theodore about this.

"Well, want to talk about it? Maybe I can help." Chardy replied, his tone softening. Asher hated how people like Chardy and Lance had such a way of tearing down his walls, even during times he couldn't say he particularly trusted them with his thoughts.

It was easier to say he could trust someone with his life, most people

around him probably didn't want to kill him, probably. But his secrets, his thoughts, those were things he couldn't just toss around, especially when it involved other people.

“I don’t know, Char…” He whispered, his voice cracking more than he would've liked.

Chardy paused here, and Asher could almost swear a flash of guilt flashed across his face.

“Asher… I know Lance talked to you about me, I don’t know what he said but… we’re still friends, you and me- I’m not happy with some of the things you’ve said, but I still care about you. I still want to help you, so please, tell me what’s going on..?” Chardy asked softly, and Asher let out a shaky sigh.

His breath billowed out around his face like smoke from a cigarette. Watching the wisps of pale air float around was a welcome distraction as he began talking, almost without thinking.

“I’m going to-... I have to deal with something, with some *one* , and I-... they are a bad person, and I want to make sure they can't hurt anyone like they hurt me. But I- I don't know how far I want to take that sentiment-” Asher spoke quickly, trying to be as vague as possible. Chardy seemed to realize he didn't want to give him all of the details, and luckily didn't press him any further.

“Well, I don’t think revenge is typically a good route to take… I understand wanting to hurt those who have hurt you, but it's like a poison. In the end, everyone gets hurt- it's only a temporary satisfaction until they get back at you, ya know?” Chardy spoke in that soft, gentle tone that Asher had missed so fucking much.

And he did understand what Chardy was saying, but at the same time something Chardy said stuck with him in an entirely different way than Chardy had clearly intended for it to.

Poison . He wasn't sure why, or how, but it felt oddly fitting that Asher should poison Liam in the same way Dr. Klaus had poisoned him. They couldn't retaliate and get revenge back on Asher if they were dead, right? That was the biggest issue with revenge that Chardy had, that it would become a cycle, but Asher could *end* the cycle.

It was then in his train of thought that Asher realized Chardy wasn't done talking, and Asher had entirely forgotten to listen to whatever else Chardy had said, and now Chardy was watching him with a

concerned expression.

“Asher?” Chardy asked, and by his tone Asher was sure that this wasn't the first time Chardy called his name just now.

“Sorry- I- I’m really tired, I blanked out. What were you saying?” He offered a halfhearted smile, but he felt his stomach drop as Chardy looked forward, his expression becoming annoyed.

“It's fine, let's just get home.” Chardy replied quietly. *Shit* . Asher annoyed him again, because he couldn't pay attention, because he couldn't listen.

This hit him much harder than it should have, likely because of the late hour and his already sensitive emotional state, but now he found himself tearing up as he just nodded a little and began walking home with Chardy.

He tried to force his mind away from their interaction, there wasn't much he could do to fix it now, because that invisible force was keeping him from even attempting to speak again at the moment.

As soon as the elevator opened up to the floor they lived on, he noticed it seemed like Chardy was about to say something. Asher quickly hurried off to his room before Chardy could get a single word out, not wanting to continue this any longer.

He was just ready to slip back into bed with Vesper, who had seemingly woken up from Asher entering the room and was now sitting up watching him.

“What happened…?” Vesper asked softly, but Asher just shook his head. He quickly climbed back into bed with Vesper, but remained silent as he hugged Vesper tightly.

Vesper seemed worried, but just quietly comforted Asher as they both went back to sleep.

Strange feelings

Chapter Summary

> Panic attacks, some fluff, a dab of poison perhaps. Asher was raised by homophobes so he's struggling, be nice to him

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Asher luckily got a few hours of sleep after that, but he needed to wake up early enough to go somewhere alone before it was time to go.

When he announced to Vesper that he needed to leave, Vesper was very hesitant to let him go, but it wasn't like Vesper could really go anywhere with Asher still.

When Asher finally managed to convince Vesper that he'd be fine alone for an hour, he was quick to leave the apartment before anyone else could question him. He had done a bit of research before leaving, so he knew exactly where he was going and exactly what he needed to get there.

He headed to a generic outdoorsy store, with some gardening things and some camping things, and most importantly, pesticides. He found the area all those precious chemicals were in and began looking around for a particular one- strychnine crystals.

He tried not to seem too overly eager as he grabbed the little glass bottle as soon as he found it, and began heading swiftly over to the checkout. He made his purchase with little suspicion from the tired-looking cashier, and all was going well as he headed to the door until he saw Amelia just coming in.

He froze, certainly looking quite guilty as he stuffed the bottle into his pocket. Amelia noticed him just then as well, and she oddly developed a similar "I've been caught" expression.

"... Hey, kid, what's up?" She asked, but she was a bad actor. Her tone was awkward and her words were overly drawn out. She had clearly been caught here doing something she wasn't supposed to be as well.

“Hey Amelia. I’m just uh- I was looking at the camping stuff-” He scrambled quickly. It had been a while since he’s really had to cover for himself like that, he hated how the skill seemed to have already slipped away from him. Having his brain fried probably didn't help much with that though.

“Right, right, yeah. Me too! This uh- this store has the best of them,” She spoke quickly, her eyes flitting around the room. Recovering from his surprise a little quicker than Amelia had, Asher had the thought now to be suspicious of why Amelia was *actually* here.

“Sure, of course. Hey, maybe we should look together, huh?” He asked with a small smirk.

It was like he could see her cringe internally as he said that, as she seemed to try and come up with an excuse.

“Oh, well, it looks like you were just leaving though, right? I wouldn't want to hold you up here just looking at tents and shit-” She said with a small chuckle.

“I was only leaving cuz I was bored, but now you’re here. I can probably offer some opinions, are you going camping soon?” He inquired, trying to sound innocent.

“Uhm- Maybe- wait, have you ever even been camping? Why are *you* looking at camping things?” She challenged, a small glint of pride in her eye as she seemed sure she’d caught Asher or something.

“Well I- no, I’ve never been before, but I want to-” He scrambled, his tone slightly awkward.

“Right, sure. So then how exactly are you gonna help me pick out good camping stuff?” She placed her hands on her hips with a smirk.

“I can pay attention to the quality that you just clearly don’t have an eye for-” He replied, forcing a confident air into his tone. It almost felt strange to be joking around with *Amelia* like this. She was Lance’s friend, and she wasn't particularly fond of Vesper, and she looked *so much* like his mom.

No- no, she didn't. Asher had decided they didnt look that alike, it was just the hair and eyes. Their face shapes were totally different, Amelia’s face was softer, not quite round like Chardy’s, just soft. A simple button nose, smooth jawline, full cheeks, not like his mom at all. His mom was thin, she was bony, she… He couldn't remember, oh

god, he couldn't remember what she looked like. He just had a vague, blurry image in his mind that refused to clear, and he *couldn't remember what his own mother looked like* .

“Oh, is that so?” Amelia’s voice speared right through his thoughts, her tone cocky as she spoke with a little chuckle.

And now suddenly he couldn’t find the words to speak, like he’d frozen up. He needed to get out of here, he needed to stop looking at Amelia, he needed to stop thinking about his *mom* .

“Yeah, but I just remember I- I have to- okay, go- bye-” He scrambled, his voice hardly above a whisper as he brushed past her and pushed the door to the shop open. He stumbled out onto the sidewalk, his breath quickening as he started looking around.

He might have heard Amelia call after him, but he was already taking off in an unfamiliar direction. Nothing looked right anymore, none of this was familiar. Where the hell even was he? He walked here on his own, this was a common area he walked when he needed to go *anywhere* , and yet the more he looked around the less he knew where he was.

Logically, he knew he’d been here before, he should know where he is, he should know where he was going, but he just *didn’t* . It was like his vision was all fuzzy now, and he’d just been dropped in a totally random place.

Tears stung his eyes as he squeezed his way through crowds of people, he just needed to get the hell out of here no matter what. The only relief he felt was when he finally spotted an alley he could duck into, some cover to get away from all these smells, sounds, and fucking *people* .

He dropped down behind a dumpster, curling himself up and placing his head between his knees. Someone had told him to do that when he wasn't feeling well, at least he was pretty sure- but for the life of him he just couldn't remember who told him that.

His breath only quickened however, as he clutched the fabric of his pants in his hands. He hardly even noticed the tears beginning to streak down his cheeks as he tried to regain his composure.

All of this was just *wrong* and he didn't know why, he could hardly fucking *think* . He still felt that feeling like he needed to leave, but he didn't know where to go. Everything was too fuzzy, he didn't know

how to get back home, and that started to make him *panic* .

He put a hand over his mouth to muffle the strangled sobs that suddenly tore through his throat. Each breath in was high pitched and made an almost choking sound, and every time his shoulders heaved with a sob it pushed all the air from his lungs.

He couldn't get enough air, like he was suffocating, and that only caused him to panic even more. He felt his body start to numb as his mind attempted to detach him even further from reality, he was only brought back to the feeling of his own nails digging deep into the skin on his arms. He hadn't even remembered sliding his hands under his long sleeves to have access to the already scabbed skin on his arms.

He hadn’t been self harming hardly ever now, not after Vesper found out, and Vesper had always been there to comfort him before he ever got himself this worked up.

Oh, *Vesper* . That’s what was wrong, Vesper wasn’t here. Asher needed to get back to him, and between the pain blossoming over his arms as he continued to scratch into them and this thought, he was able to begin dragging himself back to reality.

He was starting to feel light-headed from his still very labored breathing, but he could give himself a task to focus on.

Right now, he needed to get up and go figure out where he was. Everything still felt fuzzy as he shakily stood up, leaning against the wall a little for support. He realized things were physically blurry because of the tears still clouding his vision, so he blinked a few times to clear them, sighing with relief as things already started to look and feel clearer.

He was still shaking pretty badly as he shoved away from the wall and stumbled out of the alley, back onto the now much less crowded street. He was terrified that he would look around and not be able to recognize his surroundings that should *definitely* be recognizable, but luckily things started to make sense again, and he was pretty sure he knew where he was now.

He started walking, and things started to click into place more and more. He was able to navigate his way back to more and more familiar areas until he finally made it back to Daniel’s building.

He’d never felt such relief to be back here until now, when he rushed into the elevator and it felt so agonizingly slow to bring him up to

nearly the top floor. When it finally opened with a soft *ding* , he didn't even bother to make note of who all was out in the living room as he headed straight for his room.

Right as he turned into the hallway, something in his pocket shifted, and he suddenly remembered why he'd gone out to begin with.
He felt himself pale a little as he realized he needed to hide that little bottle, at least for another few hours until it was time to put it to good use. He stepped into his room and looked around, but all the lights were off and the curtains were drawn, so it was incredibly dark inside and he'd just been outside, so his eyes weren't at all adjusted.

He just stumbled through the room by memory and pulled the bottle of strychnine crystals out of his pocket, going to shove it into a drawer of his dresser. He damn near jumped out of his skin as he felt a soft touch against his arm, and heard Vesper speak from right behind him.

"Asher?" Was all that Vesper said, his tone was soft and concerned, and Asher now realized the touch was one of Vesper's tentacles, right before it coiled around his arm.

"Shit, you startled me-" He mumbled, still slightly surprised. Vesper couldnt usually just sneak up on him like that, he must've been a little out of it still.

"Are you alright? You seem a little shaky-" Vesper asked softly. He slowly reached a hand up to caress Asher's cheek, looking him over with a concerned expression. Asher subconsciously leaned into his hand, feeling his tense muscles relax almost instantly.

"I'm okay, I just… I don't know what happened, I just- I was talking to Amelia and just- freaked out, I guess…" He mumbled, feeling several more of Vesper's tentacles curl around his limbs.

"Amelia? Where were you-?" Vesper asked, there was something odd in his tone, but Asher couldn't place what it was exactly.

"I-... I needed to grab something, it was at a camping store and she was there… She-... I sometimes think she looks a lot like my mom, but she… she *doesn't* … and then I realized I can hardly remember what my own mom looks like and I just-... spiraled…" His voice dropped to a whisper near the end. Vesper just watched him with a sympathetic expression, pulling Asher towards the bed and sitting on the edge of it with him. Asher just sighed and leaned against his shoulder.

"Do you have any pictures of her..?" He asked quietly.

“No, the only person who would is my father, if he even bothered to keep any… but I can’t- I *won’t* go see him. He hasn’t reached out since I ran away fucking years ago, I’m not even sure the son of a bitch it still alive, honestly…” Asher replied, his tone bitter.

“I see… Maybe you could try drawing her, until the details come out right..?” Vesper suggested, running a hand through Asher's hair. Asher sighed and let his eyes drift shut, hardly noticing go fully limp against Vesper, who just kept him wrapped up in his warm, comforting embrace.

“Maybe… I don’t know, I just don’t want to get anything wrong… and I don’t want to freak out again like I did earlier-...”

“I know, but it wouldn’t be like earlier… I’d be here with you, maybe it would be something like exposure therapy, and you should only do it when you’re feeling safe and content…” Vesper replied, his tone was so gentle and soft as he hugged Asher tighter.

“Okay… maybe you’re right…” Asher replied as he snuggled against Vesper. Just then, there was a soft knock on the door that caused him to jump. Vesper stiffened as well, tightening his hold on Asher once again.

“Uh- h-hello?” He stammered, still sounding startled.

“Hey, Asher… Can I come in?” It was Amelia's voice, and she sounded oddly sad.

“Oh-...” Asher paused for a second, glancing up at Vesper. Vesper looked pretty neutral, like he didn't care, but at the same time there was just something in his eyes that made Asher think maybe he *did* care. But Asher did owe Amelia some sort of explanation, he was sure, so it was the right thing to do to let her in. “Yeah, uh, come in-”

The door opened and she stepped inside, seeming a little bit awkward as she looked around a little, having never actually been inside of Asher's room before.

“Are you alright? I uh- I tried to follow you earlier, but you sort of disappeared, I just wanted to come check up on you-” She spoke softly, a tone Asher hadn’t really heard from her before. Usually she was joking around or making fun of someone, but now she just sounded *sweet* .

“Yeah… Sorry about that- I- I’m okay, I just-...” Asher trailed off,

glancing at Vesper for help. Vesper still didn't like talking to the others, but he'd gotten better at it after Asher began having his issues with speaking.

"He likely had some sort of panic attack, but he will be okay. Thank you for your concern." Vesper spoke, his tone was much more gruff and standoffish now than he had sounded just a moment ago. Amelia looked slightly put-off, glancing between Vesper and Asher for a second.

"He- he's right, I- sorry, I promise, I'm alright- it just happens sometimes. Did uh- did you end up finding the camping stuff you needed?" Asher began speaking softly, but gradually regained a stronger and more normal voice as he continued to speak. Amelia instantly developed a deer-in-the-headlights look as she stiffened slightly.

Obviously she hadn't been there for camping things, and Asher couldn't help but wonder in the back of his mind if she had also been there for some sort of chemicals, or poisons that she wasn't supposed to have.

"Right, I uh- ended up deciding against any of it- it was all shitty quality anyways-" She scrambled.

"Uh-huh. So, what were you actually there for?" He pressed, smirking slightly.

He might've been imagining it, but he could've sworn Vespers tentacles tightened around his arms and chest. It wasn't uncomfortable, Vesper never squeezed him too tightly, but it was certainly a noticeable pressure now. When he looked at Vesper, his expression was slightly distant, but neutral, so he looked back at Amelia.

"Nothing, don't worry about it kid." She muttered with a sigh, then paused. "So, have you really never been camping?"

"Oh, no, I haven't. Just once in my backyard with my mom and a shitty little tent- why?" Asher replied.

"We should totally go sometime- I've been trying to convince Victor and Lance to go with me, but Lucy is the only one who wants to go with me and I don't wanna just go alone with her. We could do a whole little group thing-" She offered, suddenly smiling a genuine smile, not her nervous little grins from before. Her eyes really were

pretty, and he was sure they were different from his moms. Brighter- probably- because she still had so much life left in her. It hadn't all been sucked out by a horrible, horrible man yet.

"Oh- I mean, maybe- would we be allowed to? Where would we even go-?" Asher asked, suddenly feeling a small spike of excitement at the thought. It'd be nice to do something light-hearted for a bit.

"We'd have to drive for a bit, but I'm sure Daniel would be happy to see us all taking a break. But there's this cool state park about two hours away, we could hike for a bit and set up camp for a day or two- we'll have to get enough tents, though. Probably just two- one for me and Lucinda, and one for you and Vesper-" Amelia replied, sounding even more excited than Asher felt.

"Awesome- we should talk to Daniel at dinner tonight and find a time for it-" Asher suggested, sensing Vesper was ready for the conversation to be over now.

"Alright, for sure. Well uh- I'm glad you're okay, I'll talk to ya later-" She smiled and waved a bit, stepping back out of the room and quietly shutting the door as Asher mumbled his goodbye. Then he turned to Vesper, watching him with a slightly concerned expression.

"Are you okay..?" He asked gently, and Vesper was a little too quick to nod.

"I'm okay, stardust-" Vesper replied quietly.

"Oh no, do you not want to go camping? You don't have to if you don't want to- I- would you be okay here alone? Maybe we can just hike along and then you and I will leave after they get set up and stay in a hotel or- or- I don't know-" Asher spoke quickly, his tone worried. He didn't want Vesper to think that he was intentionally not taking his feelings into consideration- then Vesper would start to dislike him, or get annoyed with him, and then–

"No, no, it's fine. I'm actually looking forward to that, I haven't been out in a forest for-... probably my entire life-" Vesper replied, his tone comforting as if he could sense Asher's spiraling thoughts.

"... Really?"

"Mhm, I think it will be nice, as long as the weather is good." Vesper answered.

“Then… Why are you all tense? What’s wrong if it's not that?” Asher pressed, still sounding concerned but just a little less now.

“I- I don’t know-” Vesper said quietly. His reply caught Asher off guard a little, so he didn’t reply right away and then Vesper began speaking again. “It seems Amelia no longer dislikes me, and I don’t dislike her, but I didn’t like when she was here talking to you and I don’t know why. I didn’t get a bad feeling, like the trip was a bad idea, I just got a general annoyance. I don’t know why.” Vesper further explained.

“... Oh- are you jealous-?” Asher teased with a dumb smirk. He wasn’t sure why, but the idea of Vesper being *jealous* made him feel oddly giddy. Vesper didn’t reply, he just looked at the ground as his cheeks seemed to turn a light shade of pink.

There it was, that feeling again. The way he felt whenever he looked at Vesper, his *friend* , he had to remind himself. He knew his closeness with Vesper couldn’t be called a crush, boys couldn’t like other boys. They just couldn’t, so that certainly wasn’t what he was feeling. That was what he’d always been told, whenever the topic was brought up anyway. Even his mom had once scoffed at two guys they saw holding hands in a mall- even though they were probably just close friends too, and it was misinterpreted.

He just wanted to be best friends with Vesper, surely. He just wanted to be really close with him, even closer than he was with Lance or any of his previous friends- not that Asher ever had many of those. So that’s why Vesper was so special to him, he’s Asher’s first *best* friend who wasn’t just a family member.

He cringed internally at the thought of Chardy, but that just felt different somehow. He was close with Chardy for a while, he did care deeply for Chardy, but the feelings just felt different. Maybe because Chardy was friends with Lance first, so being best friends with Chardy would be almost like becoming best friends with Victor, but Vesper was someone he’d met and bonded with all on his own.

“A-anyways- uh- I have to get ready to go meet with Liam-... I should probably also text Lance to remind him-” Asher spoke quickly, Vesper hadn’t even started to reply verbally anyway.

“Yes, you’re right.” Vesper spoke, his voice sounding slightly more strained than it usually did as he let go of Asher almost entirely and stood up.

Asher missed the contact, but he knew it was time to get ready so he stood up as well. Luckily Vesper didn't ask what the bottle was that he'd hidden earlier, because he honestly didn't know what he would answer with if anyone did ask him about it.

So it would remain his little secret for now, until he could put it to its intended use just later today.

Chapter End Notes

> Jealous Vesper anyone??? Also more screentime for Amelia bc my irl friend has a crush on her >:(

Water under the bridge

Chapter Summary

> Major plot points in this chapter, I was probably way more hyped for it than I should be, but I've been planning these for weeks now and it finally got to happen :D
> The next few chapters are gonna be rough for me because it's all just domestic scenes that involve a bunch of characters at once and I struggle to write scenes with more than like three people

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Finally, the time came for Asher's meeting with Liam/Klaus, and he'd already come up with what was, in his opinion, a solid game plan.

He still hadn't mentioned anything about his little bottle of chemicals to anyone, and at the moment Vesper had gone to the bathroom to change.

He had a few minutes to move the strychnine to a smaller container before Vesper would be back. He was quick to move what should be a lethal dose into an old gum wrapper, which sounded dumb but he was sure this was the best discreet way to transport it.

Just as he was getting up to hide the bottle again, there was a knock on his door. Panicking slightly, he responded before he could actually hide the bottle.

"Yeah??"

And with that, the door swung open and he was too far from his dresser to hide the strychnine. He already had the wrapped filled with them in his pocket, but he had to hide the bottle behind his back as he looked at Chardy with a slightly panicked expression.

Chardy looked back at him with concern etched into his features- he looked as though he were approaching a wild animal as he took a step towards Asher.

"Hey, are you alright? Lance has been acting funny, and when I asked

him he got a little upset and mentioned something about you-...” Chardy trailed off. His voice was soft, gentle even, but… he just didn’t sound right, and Asher couldn’t really place *why* . He just didn’t sound as genuine as he usually did.

“What? What’s wrong with Lance-?” He asked immediately, now worried for his brother.

“I- I don’t know, I was coming to see if there was anything wrong with *you* - are you okay? What’s behind your back?” Chardy pressed, and began circling the room to move next to or behind Asher at an angle that he’d be able to see whatever Asher was hiding. Asher stiffened as he turned in time with Chardy, keeping his bottle hidden as he fumbled to try and get it into his pocket, but his hands were shaking now.

“What? Nothing, and I’m fine, really. We were just going to go out for lunch for some time together, we haven’t spent any time alone in ages, me and him-” Asher spoke quickly, forcing his ability into his voice. Chardy almost looked confused for a second, but the more that Asher spoke the more he seemed to accept what Asher was saying.

“Okay… Well, have fun at your lunch, then-” Chardy smiled a bit. There was even something off about his smile…

“Thanks- uh- do you have any plans for the day? Maybe you and I could hang out in the evening?” Asher suggested. With those little moments of Chardy being so *normal* , Asher was beginning to desperately miss spending frequent time with his friend.

“Oh, yeah, me and Theo were gonna go out and have a picnic in the park. I think Samson might come with, but he’s still pretty reserved,” Chardy hummed in response.

“Oh-... sounds fun- maybe-...” Asher began, then paused for a moment. “Maybe you’re right, I haven’t spent any real time with Theodore or Samson, and-... I know I’m not always trusting, so maybe I was too quick to judge. So maybe- maybe next time you plan something with them, do you think you could invite me too..?” He asked softly. Asher knew that neither Vesper nor Lance would approve of what he was doing, but had that ever stopped him before?

He almost wished he could eat his words as Chardy suddenly gave him this eerie smile. He was sure it was supposed to be genuine, but he just looked *ominous* instead.

“That would be wonderful, actually! I’ll talk to him about it later, I’ll see you tonight okay?” Chardy patted Asher on the shoulder, and it took everything in him not to recoil away. It was so strange, like a feeling of uncanny valley when he talked to Chardy sometimes.

Something wasn’t right, but now that he had a foot in the door with Chardy then there wasn’t really anything else he could do until later. Right now he needed to focus on his current issue at hand.

He finished getting ready, and then he, Vesper, and Lance were all off on their way to park outside of Liams hospital he worked at.

Asher was quiet the entire ride, which made the whole thing awkward because despite his recent occasional mutism, he still seemed to be the one filling most of the silences with Vesper and Lance.

But now he was just silent, leaning against the car door with a hand in his pocket, ensuring his precious little crystals didn’t go anywhere. Eventually Lance cleared his throat, clearly tired of the quiet, and he began talking.

“So, what’s the exact plan again?” He asked, glancing over at Asher who was in the passenger seat.

“I’m going to get out and follow him until he’s alone, and you guys use the tracker in my phone to catch up with the car once I stop moving. I’m gonna talk to him and record the whole conversation, and get him to say something incriminating.” Asher replied, his voice was initially a little raspy until he spoke loud enough.

“I think we should follow you immediately, what if something goes wrong?” Vesper spoke from the back seat. He didn’t usually voice his concerns around anyone but Asher, so Asher was glad to see him gaining some more confidence.

“I just don’t want him to realize something’s up, but if you guys think you can be really careful with following us then I don’t really care what you do. Thank you for being concerned for me, Vesper, but I think I’ll be alright alone with him-” Asher replied. There should’ve been extra emphasis on that “I think”, though because the more Asher thought about it the more he wondered if he could ever stand to look that man in the face again, like how he’d struggle to look at Burton again if he were still alive.

He just had to do it, he didn't have a choice. He'd already made up his mind what he was going to do, and he was sure he'd get away with it.

So the last few minutes of the drive were quiet until they pulled up to a crowded parking lot. Per Asher's request, Lance parked near the back of it.

"Okay, I'm gonna get out now and go watch for him. Keep that tracker pulled up, please-" Asher mumbled. He noticed out of the corner of his eye that his wings were quivering in anticipation.

Perhaps it was fear, but he was feeling a shockingly low amount of that given his situation.

"Okay- just-... be safe, Asher-" Lance whispered, leaning over the center console to give Asher a sort of awkward half hug with the limited space they had in the car. Asher missed with their hugs didn't feel so awkward or forced.

"I will, don't worry about me-" Asher replied, hugging Lance back briefly before he slipped out of the car.

He tucked his wings in close and began walking towards the building, pulling up the dark red bandana from around his neck to cover the entire lower half of his face.

Between that and the hood on his hoodie, he was sure that Klaus wouldn't recognize him. And he blended in well too, it was a pretty cold day despite the sun actually being out from behind the clouds for once.

Briefly, his mind wandered to Chardy, and he wondered if Chardy was enjoying his picnic.

He tried not to think about that for too long as he did his best to spot Klaus. It was almost like magic how the man stood out to Asher like a sore thumb, despite leaving with a small cluster of other doctors and nurses amongst a thick crowd of people.

He stayed back a bit before trailing them as they all dispersed in the parking lot, heading to cars or other nearby buildings.

Asher was almost surprised at how fast Klaus had found himself alone- although it certainly wasn't hard to believe that someone like that wouldn't have many friends who'd want to go eat lunch with him.

Once Klaus was on a slightly less busy street, walking leisurely on the sidewalk, Asher decided to make his move. He sped up, quickly catching up to the older man. He made it seem like he was trying to move past Klaus and then "accidentally" bumped into him.

"Oh! Sorry, my fault-" He scrambled, coming to a full stop as he stood in front of the now slightly disgruntled older man.

"Ugh, watch where you're going, alright?" Klaus tried to push the annoyance from his tone, but Asher could tell he was annoyed. What a prick, to be such a horrible person and still have the gall to get annoyed with someone for bumping into his slow, old ass on the street.

"Right, I'm so sorry I just–" He cut himself off, making a big show of looking Klaus over and widening his eyes.

"Dr. Howard?? Oh goodness, I just recognized you- I'm sorry, I'm a huge nerd for all kinds of medical stuff and I just- I'm a huge fan!" He gushed, pushing a bit of his power into his tone so Liam would be more swayed to believe him. The man instantly developed a very arrogant expression and overall demeanor after that.

"Ah, well, it's good to meet you. What's your name, boy?" Liam responded.

"You can call me Sammy, I'm so happy to meet you-" He said quickly, throwing his hand out to shake Liams. He felt a little sick to his stomach, but he did his best to push it away as he worked over the old man, who was quick to shake his hand back.

"It's a pleasure to meet you as well. I might have a moment to talk whilst I'm on my lunch, care to join me?" Liam asked with an almost sickening grin.

"Oh I would love that! But do you mind if we swing by a cafe? I'm *exhausted* - I'm sure you understand, being a doctor in a hospital this busy has got to be tiring-" Asher replied, keeping his tone chipper as he began walking again, staying next to Liam.

"Ah yes, I could probably go for a coffee as well-" Liam responded, walking a little quicker than Asher.

"Well, what's your order? Coffee's on me today-"

"Just a black coffee with a tiny bit of cream and sugar for me. Thanks,

Sammy." The older man replied.

Once they got to the cafe, Liam headed to the bathroom to go wash his hands or whatever. Asher could only wonder if Liam thought water and soap could wash away the sins of what Klaus had done.

He leaned against the counter as he placed his order, briefly looking at the barista. She was right around Asher's age, her long red hair was tied up in a bun that let a few shorter strands fall into her face. She was pretty pale, her nose and cheeks were dusted with freckles, and her pale blue eyes looked as tired and dull as Asher was beginning to feel.

"Hello, what can I get for you?" Her soft voice was sweet like honey as she spoke in a very perfected customer-service tone. He wasn't sure what about her was so oddly enchanting, but he found himself sort of just staring at her for a moment.

"Hey, can I get a small iced mocha latte with oat milk and whipped cream on top, and whatever chocolate toppings you've got?" He paused for a moment to give her time to punch that into the computer in front of her, then he continued. "And then a medium black coffee with whatever 'a little' sugar and cream? Please make sure that one is *piping* hot though-"

"Of course, and under what name?" She finished putting in the rest of the order. She seemed to fumble just a little, perhaps she was still relatively new to this job. Her nails were painted a deep shade of red that contrasted her skin quite nicely.

"Sammy, please-" He responded.

"Alright, that'll be eleven dollars and sixty-five cents-" She hummed in reply. Asher handed over a twenty dollar bill, and watched as she carefully gathered his change, triple counting it before handing it over to him.

"Thank you-" He plopped the change directly into the tip jar and then went over to a table. They wouldn't bring the coffee out to him, at least he was seriously hoping that they wouldn't, but he needed Liam to join him at the table so he wouldn't see Asher slip something in his coffee when he went to grab it.

Liam strolled out of the bathroom and headed over to Asher, sitting across from him at the table.

“Where’s the coffee?” The man asked as he adjusted his nametag on his generic light blue shirt.

“Still being made, I’m sure it’ll be done in a second-” He replied with a smile. Of course Liam couldn’t see his mouth due to the mask, but he was sure that the smile was audible in his voice.

And right on cue, the name for the drinks was called. Liam initially moved to stand up, but Asher stood faster and gestured for Liam to stay seated.

“No no, I’ll get it. You sit, put your feet up, relax-” He said quickly. Liam just shrugged and rested back against his seat as Asher turned to walk across the little cafe to the counter the coffees had been set up on.

He tried to ignore the shaking of his hands as he reached into his pocket, risking a glance back at Liam. Luckily the man was turned away from Asher, not paying attention, and there were only three other people in the cafe- none of whom were paying any mind to him.

He slipped his hand out of his pocket, fumbling with the gum wrapper for a moment before dumping the crystals into the small opening on the lid of Liams coffee. He did his best to get all of them inside, then he wiped away any residual powder from the lid before grabbing both coffees and heading back over to Liam, shaking the coffee around a little to mix the drink.

He sat across from him again and set Liams coffee in front of him, slipping his mask down just enough to take a sip of his own as Liam raised an eyebrow at him.

“That looks like straight sugar, how tired are you?” Liam asked with amusement. The *audacity* of this man to act so fucking *normal* .

“Pft, I just need the boost to make it home before I get to bed. So, do you mind if I ask a couple of questions about your work and job?” Asher inquired, leaning forward in his seat as if he were incredibly fascinated.

“Yes, yes, I suppose that is what we are here for,” Liam replied as he continued to drink.

Asher began asking very generic, reporter style questions, all while watching Liam's body language and signs for the poison kicking in. He

needed to stall the man for at least fifteen minutes for it to kick in, but hopefully longer so he could ensure that Liam would never make it back to the hospital.

At some point Liam had mumbled something about burnt coffee after he made a face, but Asher just carried on as normal so that Liam would do the same, which seemed to work pretty well as the man continued drinking despite his complaints with the taste.

Right around the fifteen minute mark, Asher began asking some darker questions, and he hit record on the little device he'd completely forgotten about until now.

"Do you think you'd be forgiven, if your wife knew what you did?" He asked in a harsh whisper. Liam blinked a few times, clearly caught off guard as he seemed a little extra confused.

"What?"

"Hm? Oh, I just asked what your wife thinks of your work- is she proud?" Asher reworded in a much lighter, more normal tone.

"Ah, yes… she- she doesn't understand much of my work, stay at home wife you know. She never went to college, so she just doesn't quite get what I'm talking about, but she appreciates my efforts." Liam responded, still sounding slightly confused.

"And what's your opinion on unique hybrids? You haven't mentioned anything about mine, after all-" Asher inquired. Liam sort of looked him over, squinting his eyes as he began to go a little pale.

"What uh- what hybrid are you? Apologies, I must be more tired than I thought-" Liam mumbled.

"Ah, better finish up that coffee then, doctor." Asher said with a chuckle, trying not to sound as maniacal as he felt. Liam nodded a little as he finished off what little was left in the cup, remaining silent.

"Perhaps you could use some air, hm? Come on- it's a little stuffy in here-" Asher spoke, standing up and waiting for Liam to stand as well. The man struggled for a moment, seeming to have a bit of a hard time standing up straight. Most likely his stomach was hurting, that was one of the first symptoms. Now Asher just needed to make sure he didn't throw up all the poison, because right now if he got it out of his system he'd probably live.

He was quick to lock arms with Liam and head out the door, walking out onto the street. He noticed Lance's car with its tinted windows, parked across the street from the cafe. He began walking in a direction leading away from the hospital.

"Let's go to a cute little restaurant, we can get you some food quickly before you have to get back to work-" Asher hummed, walking a bit quicker. Liam mumbled a response, stumbling to keep up with Asher. Eventually Asher turned down an alley, bringing Liam to nearly the very back of it before leaning him against the wall.

"Alright, now sit down." He said firmly, and Liam in his confused state just slid to the ground.

"I've got to get going now, alright? Thanks for the insight, Dr. Klaus. I hope you're fucking happy with what you did to me, what you've done to every poor person who's had the *misfortune* of being under you 'care'." Asher hissed, his voice filled with toxicity.

Klaus' eyes widened as he looked up at Asher, opening his mouth to speak.

"You-... who are you..?" Klaus demanded, some of the strength seemingly surging back into his body as he lunged upward and grabbed a fistful of fabric around Asher's shirt.

Asher stiffened and tried to yank back, but couldn't pull away from the dying man's grip as he was dragged down to Liams level.

"I doubt you'd even know my fucking name, you *sick bastard* ." Asher snapped back, pulling as far away as he could from Klaus' face.

"Burton… you're his kid- one of them-" Klaus' voice was strained and his hands were trembling. It was only a matter of time until Asher could leave him here to die, alone and cold just like he deserved.

"I'm not his *anything* . Now, I'm going to ask you a few questions. If you answer them I might just save your life, but if you don't… well, I'm sure I can come up with some creative ways to prolong it." Asher spoke harshly. Klaus seemed to consider his options for a moment, but surely it was hard for him to think at the moment.

"About what..?" Klaus asked, and Asher grinned.

"What do you know about two kids named Theodore and Samson? They aren't brothers, but they're both bats. Voice control and

telekinesis." Asher answered, feeling some relief as Klaus let go of him, though Asher stayed crouching right in front of him anyways.

"Mm…" Klaus' voice trailed off as his gaze shifted off to the distance. Asher snapped his fingers twice in front of the man's face.

"Think quicker, old man. I need answers before you croak." He said firmly.

"Samson… strange boy- he won't talk if Theodore isn't around. I… he's trusting, easy to work with…" Asher could hear Klaus' voice growing weaker and weaker.

"And Theodore? Quickly." Asher demanded.

"... Theodore… his power-... what did you say it was..?" Klaus asked, narrowing his eyes.

"He can change his voice- god, shouldn't you know that?" Asher asked, his tone disgusted.

"No… no that's not right…" Klaus muttered, his eyes beginning to drift shut.

"...What? What do you mean?" Asher asked.

"His power… its…. He can change-.... things, people…?" The man's head fell to the side, his breaths shallowing as Asher shook his shoulder.

"What?? What is it?" He was nearly shouting at the man, who gave no response as he seemed to be struggling to breathe. "Damnit!" Asher stood up, moving away from the man. Now he needed to get the hell out of here.

He stopped the recording in his pocket, and then ran out of the alley. Temporarily blinded by the light from the sun, he whipped his head around, looking for Lance's car.

He was shaking, and he could feel himself beginning to panic as he spotted the car and stumbled towards it. It was parked across the street again, luckily just nearby, but as he crossed the street to get to it a car nearly took him out.

He really needed to pay more attention, but now all he could focus on was fumbling to open the car door, and then practically falling into

the back seat of the car.

“Are you okay?? What happened-?” Lance demanded, turning around as much as he could from the front seat.

He felt a flood of relief as several of Vesper's tentacles curled around his arms, and Vesper pulled him into a tight hug.

“Where is Klaus? Did he hurt you?” Vesper asked, his tone soft as he ran a hand through Asher’s hair to calm him. It worked too, Asher’s breathing started to even out as he leaned into Vesper.

“I’m fine- he-... can we talk about it when we get home? I-... I got what I wanted, but we need to get out of here-” Asher mumbled. Vesper just nodded a bit and stopped his questioning there, instead just hugging Asher tighter with a concerned expression. Lance was a different story, however.

“Why? Asher what the hell happened-??” Lance demanded.

“Bring him home, Lance. He said he’ll tell us when we’re home.” Vesper spoke, his tone was low and dangerous now. There was a long moment of silence before Lance sighed and put the car in drive, whipping out of the parking spot and taking off as fast as he could with whatever traffic there was.

Asher wasn’t paying attention to that now though, he was just listening to Vesper’s breathing and keeping his eyes closed. He kept wondering what the hell Klaus could’ve meant by what he said about Theodore, and he was internally kicking himself for not questioning the man earlier than he had.

The car ride home was silent after that, but Asher was honestly glad for that fact. When they pulled into the parking lot behind Daniels building, all three of them climbed out of the car. Vesper kept several tentacles curled around Asher’s arms, grounding him, as they all headed inside.

The sky was beginning to shroud the earth with dark, potential storm clouds. Asher watched them swirl around until the moment they stepped inside, and took the elevator up to the living quarters.

When the elevator stopped and opened, Asher noticed Chardy sitting with Theodore and Samson in the living room, as well as Lucinda and Amelia. He made brief eye contact with Theodore from across the room, and he wished he could pick apart the guy's brain like how it

sometimes felt others were picking him apart.

He wanted to know what secrets were hidden in that mind of his, and what the hell he did to make so many people trust him so quickly, if voice manipulation wasn't actually his power.

He was torn away from his thoughts as Vesper gently tugged him towards their room. Chardy turned his head just then and waved.

"Hey, Asher! How was lunch?" Chardy asked, then his expression sort of fell as he looked over Vesper. "I thought you had said it was just you and Lance?"

"Right, uh-... the plans sort of changed- I'll talk to you later-" He sort of half-heartedly mumbled, finding it hard to speak again.

Vesper didn't let him stick around long enough to hear if Chardy replied to that, and Lance was already waiting in Asher's room by that point.

Vesper moved to sit with Asher on the bed, and after shutting the door Lance pulled a chair up from Asher's desk to sit in. Asher sighed, looking at the ground as he tried to gather his thoughts so he could begin explaining, but before he could speak Lance started to talk.

"So what happened, Asher? Where did Klaus go?" Lance asked.

"Well… We were getting coffee, and I was just asking him questions initially, but I-... I slipped something in his drink, to make him talk a little easier-" Asher murmured.

"You *what* ??" Lance demanded, raising his voice for a second before sort of realizing that they didn't want to be overheard and quieting down.

"Then once I got him talking, I started walking with him-" Asher carried on as if Lance hadn't spoken at all. "He wasn't doing so good by that point, so I brought him into that alley to have him sit so I could ask the really important questions. But he-... I put a little too much, he died faster than I was meaning I guess-..."

"You- *died* ?? 'Faster that you'– You *planned* to kill him just not that fuckin fast-?! Asher what the fuck!" Lance flipped out, standing up and towering over Asher.

Vesper pulled Asher back a little a few of his tentacles coiling

defensively around him.

“I, for one, am glad he did that. One less man like Burton walking around.” Vesper spoke up in Asher’s defense.

“Exactly, if I didn’t do it, who’s to say how many other people he would hurt? He has kids- who knows what he could’ve done to them…” Asher contributed.

“That’s not- that wasn’t the plan! You shouldn’t have done that, Asher. I’m not *at all* saying that he didn’t deserve it, but *you* shouldn’t have been the one to do it.” Lance scolded, his wings flaring out behind him.

“Why not??” Asher demanded.

“Because you told us that you were just going to get him to talk, then we’d release the audio publicly and let his life fall apart. Someone else probably would’ve killed him, but now we actually *have* to go and tell Daniel about this because he’s going to have to help us cover it up! I don’t-... this was the whole reason I never wanted you here, kid- I don’t want you to get involved with this shit… It’s not safe for you-” Lance responded, his voice lowering to a soft, genuine whisper at the end.

Asher went quiet for a moment, actually considering what Lance was saying before forming a reply.

“... I’m not a kid, but I am sorry I didn’t tell you, Lance- it- it was sort of a last minute decision… See I- last night me and Chardy talked a little, and he- I didn’t tell him about the plan at all, but I was just talking to him and kinda just-... got the idea-” Asher mumbled.

“You- you talked to Chardy? Why-?” Lance asked, sounding a little concerned now.

“He was just- out in the living room when I was going to go on a walk, and so we walked together… It was nice, it was like things were totally normal, and then today he was all weird again…” Asher sighed.

“I wonder why. I can agree he seems to behave oddly, but I still struggle to see exactly what you mean with Theodore and Samson.” Vesper added.

“I think-... I think it might have something to do with Theodore’s

power-" Asher spoke softly. He figured now would probably be a good time to come clean about everything. He didn't like lying to Lance anyway.

"... What do you mean?" Lance asked suspiciously.

"When I asked Klaus about them- he said voice changing wasn't Theodore's power. It was something else, something about changing people or things- he never finished his sentence-" Asher answered.

"... He- he could've been wrong though, right? Delusional- I mean, he was dying-..." Lance muttered.

"I really don't think so, Lan- I mean it would make sense, and maybe it doesn't work on me the same way Vesper's power doesn't work on me when I don't let it. So now I just need to find someone else who would know, or-... ask him- since I sort of- I kinda told Chardy that I wanted to hang out with him, Theodore, and Samson together-" Asher spoke quickly, looking at the ground again.

" *What* ?? Fucking christ, Asher- why is today just the capitol of all bad ideas-??" Lance asked, his voice raising again.

"Listen I just- I miss Chardy, and- maybe it would be a good thing. Keep your friends close and your enemies closer, you know? And so I told Chardy I'd try to hang out with him tonight, and I wanted to spend time with the three of them at some point- oh! And I told Amelia that me and Vesper would go camping with her and Lucinda-" Asher responded, just quickly trying to get through everything before he forgot. He'd made far too many plans these last few days.

"Shit, kid- well-... thank you for telling me. I- I'm gonna go to my room and think for a bit, okay? I'll see you at dinner tonight-" Lance sighed, all the fight seeming to leave his body. Even the light from his wings dulled a little, causing Asher to cringe a little. He thought he had done a good thing, so why was Lance still not happy? At least he didn't seem *angry* …

"Okay-... see you later, Lance-" Asher mumbled, and then Lance left the room.

He sighed and leaned farther into Vesper, closing his eyes as Vesper hugged him tighter.

"You should get some rest, but we need to get you food soon since I'm sure you didn't eat breakfast today, or anything at the cafe…" Vesper

spoke softly, lightly running his hand over Asher's wings.

Asher just nodded a little, his wing twitching into Vesper's hand as he relaxed a little more.

“Yeah…”

Chapter End Notes

> So, what did we think of Asher becoming technically a murderer? Also I definitely got put on a watch list for what I had to look up to figure out what chemical you could buy that didn't have a super strong taste and didn't need a ton of it to kill you oml

Camping trip

Chapter Summary

> Okay full transparency I wrote this chapter in like two and a half hours total broken up over the late night, and I was half asleep for the last ten pages and I sort of hate them. Anyways very domestic chapter for you guys, we learn some important stuff though and Samson is mischaracterized

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Later that evening, Vesper and Asher went to join everyone at the table for dinner. There were no longer any empty seats, so Vesper had to sit between Asher and Lance, and Chardy was on Asher's other side. Naturally Theodore sat next to Chardy, but Samson was oddly sitting right across from Asher.

The table had already been filled with chatter and conversations before Asher sat down, so he didn't make any effort to speak to anyone about any of the plans he was trying to make with them. Luckily it didn't take long for Amelia to speak however.

"Hey Dan?" She asked at some point, cutting through some of the smalltalk with a slightly louder tone. Daniel turned to her with a soft smile- maybe Asher was overthinking, but something seemed just a little off about him today. He was always generally nice of course, but right now he just seemed so much softer, quieter, maybe.

"What's up?" He asked. His voice sounded normal, at least.

"Me, Asher, Lucy and Vesper were talking about going camping. Not sure when yet, but we wanted to run it by you and see when the best time would be-" Amelia responded, then paused for a second. "Anyone else who wants to come can too, but they'll need to bring their own tent and stuff-" She added quickly.

"Oh, that sounds really nice- any time you're wanting works fine, but don't go this weekend. It's supposed to be particularly stormy, and I don't want anyone getting hypothermia out there. Also make sure everyone brings extra coats- it's still not supposed to start snowing for

a bit but it'll start sooner than later-" Daniel replied, his tone was light and happy, but not unnaturally so. Asher didn't like having to pick apart *everything* about the people around him. He'd thought after moving out of his parents house that he would've been done with that.

"Alright, awesome- sometime in the middle of the week would be better anyway, since less people will be there-" Amelia spoke happily. Asher didn't know her well enough to know what exactly was normal for her or not.

"... Perhaps I could come along?" Samson asked with a wide smile before anyone else could speak. He made direct eye contact with Asher, sending an involuntary shudder up his spine. He stared right back at Samson, trying hard to hide how unnerved he was.

"I don't think that's a good idea, Sam." Theodore spoke, his voice firm. Asher whipped his head over to look at Theodore, who was sternly glaring at Samson.

He looked around for anyone to speak up for Samson, but no one said a *word* . They all just carried on eating, and those who weren't involved in the conversation were continuing their own smalltalk. There was a very long pause between the two bats before Samson spoke again, shuffling his scruffy dark wings almost awkwardly.

"I think perhaps some fresh air would be good for me- you know I don't like the city, Theo…" Samson spoke softly, and Asher was startled at how *heartbroken* he sounded. And yet still no one said a fucking thing, they were all acting like it was completely normal.

"No. Sammy, you know I get nervous when you aren't around- I don't want you to go-" Theodore shifted his tone now. He still sounded firm, but he also sounded almost pleading. It was strange, the feeling Asher got was *almost* like when he focused on how Vespers power felt in the back of his mind. At the same time, perhaps it was something a little more like Asher's own power- he obviously didn't know what it felt like to hear his own power from the outside though so he couldn't know for sure, and no one else seemed to notice anything was going on.

So it couldn't be Vesper's exact power because everyone was able to tell when Vesper's power was affecting them enough to completely alter how they were acting in a situation instead of just swaying it.

"... Okay, nevermind… I'm sorry, Theo…" Samson whispered. Just then, Asher got an idea. He could combat Vesper's and Chardy's

abilities, of course it was easy because he knew *exactly* what he was combating, and now he didn't- but it could still be worth a try.

"Actually, I think Samson coming is a great idea." Asher spoke, his voice slightly strained. He instantly began to feel how low his energy was as he used his ability- he was able to rest earlier, but he didn't sleep so it didn't do much to replenish his energy. He just hadn't realized exactly how tired he was until right then.

"Are you sure?" Lance asked from next to Asher, sounding slightly startled. Theodore shot Asher a quick glare, and Samson's eerie smile returned.

"I just don't think so, I think Samson should stay here. With me." Theodore replied coldly.

"Maybe Theodore is right–" Samson began, his normal cheery tone returning, but Asher quickly cut him off.

"No. Samson is coming with us." He snapped, which caught Chardy, Vesper, and Lance off guard. He just wished *someone* here could break out of whatever it was Samson was doing and help him out.

"I think that may be a good idea, actually. Samson needs a break from training with me anyway-" Daniel spoke, and relief flooded through Asher's veins. Daniels' word was usually final when it came to things like this, so with any luck no one would argue.

Theodore paused for a moment, before smiling brightly and nodded, his dark hair flopping in his face. Asher glanced to Chardy, who was watching Theodore with such a strange expression. He looked lost in thought, but with a soft smile on his lips and a little glimmer in his eyes. Maybe he could ask him about it later, since Chardy had sort of agreed to hang out with him alone tonight.

"Great, it's decided then. Amelia, Vesper, Lucinda, Samson, and I will all go camping next week." Asher spoke in a slightly firm tone. He jumped a little as he felt Vesper's hand grab his own under the table, then he gave Vesper a small smile before squeezing his hand back.

"Nasty, camping. Humans built houses so they wouldn't have to sleep outside anymore, you know." Victor muttered his disdain, and Lance quickly agreed with him, and then everything carried on as normal.

Well, mostly normal. Every time Theodore looked at Asher, it was like he could feel the pure *toxicity* attempting to seep into his mind. It was

fucking draining, because now he was consciously focusing on not letting Theodore into his mind- who the fuck knows what that would do.

Maybe he had some sort of mind reading, or brainwashing. All Asher knew for certain was that he wanted no part of Theodore in his head, and he hated the fact that Theodore was able to affect his friends' minds like this, and unlike Asher they had no defense against it.

Finally once dinner was over, Chardy and Theodore began to head off to the living room, but Asher jumped up and headed over to them.

"Hey, Char, are we still good to hang out for a bit?" Asher asked, smiling a bit. Chardy seemed hesitant, glancing over at Theodore for a moment. Theodore looked like he was about to say something as he looked back at Chardy, but Asher envisioned putting up a wall between the two of them, blocking whatever it was that Theodore was trying to do with his power with his own.

"Weren't we going to watch a movie?" Theodore asked, and Chardy thought for a moment. Theodore seemed to notice that something was wrong, there was a slight shift in his expression as his muscles tensed up.

"I don't remember talking about it, but I'm sure we can later, you know how late I like to stay up. Maybe you and Sam can get started, and I'll go hang with Asher for a bit-?" Chardy suggested, his smile was cheerful but it was *normal* . Whatever wall Asher built had *worked* , and it made it more than worth the way that he felt like he could collapse now.

"Oh, alright- if you're sure-" Theodore mumbled, then turned away. Asher's knees were shaking as he quickly turned to walk down the hallway with all the rooms, followed by Chardy. He kept up his defense around Chardy for the moment, which was even more exhausting, but worth it to know Chardy was just *himself* .

"Are you okay?" Chardy asked softly, sort of looking Asher up and down as he walked alongside him.

"... I'm uh- I'm okay, thank you Chardy… Just really, *really* tired- but I'm glad we can spend a bit of time together, I've sorta missed you-" Asher replied, forcing a small, crooked smile as he headed straight to Chardy's room.

"Oh, I guess we haven't spent much time together, hm? I'm sorry

about that, I guess I just- got a little caught up in welcoming Theodore and Samson and just-... I don't know-" Chardy sighed wistfully as he plopped down on the edge of his neatly made bed. Asher shut the door and went to sit next to him, finally letting down the imaginary wall and just hoping that Theodore's power couldn't cut through real ones.

He sagged with relief once he no longer had to keep up the constant shield- in that moment he really wished that some of what Burton did to him would've at least worked to make his powers stronger, as it had for Vesper.

"... Right- can I ask you about Theodore, actually?" Asher asked, somewhat hesitantly. He was having a bit of a hard time seeing straight, and he was worried it would be hard for him to tell what the right thing to say was.

"Oh-... sure?" Chardy asked, tilting his head a bit. He still seemed normal, which was good.

"He-... You two are pretty close already, right? I mean- you spend a lot of time together-" Asher started, not really sure how to phrase what he was getting at. Chardy sort of got this distant look for a moment before he smiled, and responded.

"Yeah, he's awesome… I really like him, Asher-"

"Right… and- you were looking at him earlier–" Asher began again, but this time Chardy's cheeks flushed and he quickly cut Asher off.

"What- what do ya mean? I look at everyone, when they're talking, I mean-" Chardy quickly scrambled, which surprised Asher a bit.

"Well I- I just- The way you were looking at him- I wanted to ask about it-" Asher paused again, really not even sure what he was trying to say now.

"... I *really* like him-..." Chardy suddenly whispered. Asher looked up at him in confusion.

"What- do you mean-?"

"I mean I- he's like, *really* cute- and we get along well and- I think he likes me too, but I'd be too nervous to ever make the first move or anything and- I don't know, I've never tried asking anyone out on a date before so I don't even know what to say or do-" Chardy

mumbled. Asher just stared at him for a moment, feeling himself freeze up and his palms begin to sweat.

“Hold- hold on- a date-? I don’t- I don’t understand- he’s- you guys are- are friends- and he’s- he’s a guy, Chardy-” Asher stammered, and he watched as the blood sort of drained from Chardy’s face.

“... Oh, shit I- I sort of thought you-... I mean you and Vesper are-.... Please don’t tell me you’re fucking homophobic, Asher-” Chardy’s voice suddenly became very quiet and almost pleading as he watched Asher, his eyes wide and his face pale.

“... Homophobic? What-?” Asher asked after a moment. He was too damn tired to be having this conversation, and nothing Chardy was saying was making any damn sense.

“Like- like you hate gay people for just loving who they love-” Chardy mumbled, his tone slightly bitter-sounding.

“Gay..?” He’d heard the word of course, but never in *this* context.

“Good gods Asher- do you- you don’t know what I’m talking about, do you?” Chardy asked. His voice was such a mix of emotions- but oddly enough the most prominent one seemed to be relief.

“... No- I’m sorry, Chardy- I’m- I’m trying not to fall asleep right now, if I’m being honest-” He chuckled a small, half delirious little laugh.

“Jesus- well now I have to explain it all to you- why are you so tired this early though? Are you okay-?” Chardy asked with a touch of concern.

“Yeah I’m- I’m probably fine, I’ll just go to sleep early tonight. Please- please explain to me what you’re talking about though-” Asher responded.

“... Okay- you- you have social media don’t you?? You seem like the time to be on the super LGBT side of TikTok, seriously- gods, anyway. Gay doesn’t mean what it used to anymore- now it’s a term people use to describe when they’re only attracted to people of the same gender- like- I’m gay, I only like guys, so I’ll never date a girl-” Chardy explained, and Asher looked at the ground. Everything he’d thought he knew about relationships was altering at the moment, and he was too exhausted to properly process it.

“I don’t- I’ve always been told you can’t- you can’t *do that* -” He

mumbled.

“Yeah, well… A lot of people are told that- I know I was, but this- this is a safe place for that. Everyone here knows- or, well, everyone but you I suppose- Amelia is a Lesbian, which means she only likes girls. Victor and Lance are straight though which means they also like girls, not guys- I mean, shit- even *Vesper* knows the very basics about this stuff-” Chardy muttered the last part under his breath, but Asher still heard it and was thoroughly shocked as he quickly looked back up at Chardy.

“ *What* ??” He exclaimed.

“Yeah, he- I mean at some point he had some access to the outside through restricted social media- he didn’t talk much about it but he really seemed to understand what I was saying when I talked to him about it. I guess there are still some corners of the world that don’t know about that kind of stuff- I sort of just assumed that you were just- not straight- cuz how you act- but I’m sorry for assuming, I probably shouldn’t have- I guess just seeing how you and Vesper act I kinda thought you had a crush on him or something-” Chardy responded, lightly patting a hand on Asher’s shoulder.

“... I- I’ve never had a crush on *anyone* , I don’t think-... I just… I sort of thought it was really looked down on to even think that way of people the same gender as you…” Asher replied quietly.

“It sometimes can be, but- not here. You can be yourself here-” Chardy smiled softly, and without thinking Asher just leaned forward and hugged him tightly.

“Thanks… I- I’m going to think about that for a bit but- for now can we just play a card game or something?” Asher asked quietly, and Chardy nodded.

“Of course- but then I think you ought to go straight to bed-” Chardy replied with a hum, shifting to sit on the floor as he grabbed his deck of cards from his nightstand.

After spending some time with Chardy, Asher had practically stumbled back to his room and went to sleep with Vesper protectively watching over him.

He avoided Theodore like the plague after that, but he actually didn’t

find himself avoiding Samson quite as much. He wouldn't leave a room just because Samson was there the same way that he would if Theodore was in a room.

He also spent more time consciously blocking Theodore's power from others, trying to see just how many people he could protect at once before it became too much and sapped all of his energy. That being said he was noticeably more tired recently, and it was very concerning to Lance, Vesper, and Chardy whenever Chardy wasn't under Theodore's spell.

Meanwhile, Amelia had locked in the plans for their little camping trip and confirmed everything with everyone. Asher was glad she was taking the initiative to plan this so he didn't have to worry about it, and could just go along with whatever was going on. They all had to go to the camping store to *actually* buy camping supplies this time though, so he and Vesper had gotten to pick out a nice tent to share. Amelia and Lucinda still decided to share a tent as well, and then Samson ended up getting a smaller one for just himself. Luckily he didn't seem too upset about it- but during that outing he had seemed so much quieter, not like his usual cheery and almost manic self when he was around Theodore.

So on the day of the trip, they all piled into the back of Amelia's beat up old car with their tents and a cooler of food they decided to bring with them.

The car ride ended up being a little over two hours, but there was pretty much constant chatter that Asher actually found himself partaking in. Vesper was quiet beside him, but Samson would occasionally make small, quiet comments. It almost felt like the farther they got from home, the more *real* Samson felt. He didn't get that eerie uncanny valley feeling when looking at him now, and Samson actually seemed to relax a little too.

Once they made it out to the forest and parked, they all loaded up their things and began the hike to a nice and remote spot. Vesper was a huge help in carrying things thanks to his tentacles, and it took everything in Asher not to make a snarky comment about people only *now* appreciating Vesper and his attributes.

Chardy's conversation popped into the back of his mind at that point, and he wished that he had actually taken the time to sit down and think about it. But he didn't- he just kept pushing all the little thoughts away like he was in denial or something.

They all struggled a little to set up their tents and a campfire, but it wasn't quite dark yet by the time they had gotten it fully set up. Asher hesitated for a while before subtly signaling to Vesper to stick close by. He got no visual response, but he knew that Vesper had noticed and would listen. Then he headed over to Samson, offering a small smile.

"Hey, Samson-" He spoke. Samson looked up from where he was sitting on the ground under a tree.

"Oh, hello Asher-" Samson smiled brightly. He was acting more normal now, and Asher didn't *feel* like Samson seemed to be under any external control, but he was still acting more happy than he thought someone *reasonably* should upon seeing *Asher* .

"Hey! Thank you for inviting me along, I really do appreciate it. I've always enjoyed being out in the woods-" Samson paused, then looked around as if he was worried that someone might be listening. "Of course, I still miss Theo- I wish he was here, but I know he'll be happy about getting to spend time with Chardy without me lurking-..." Samson mumbled.

Asher just couldn't shake the feeling that this felt so *familiar* somehow. The way Samson was acting, or the way he was talking, and he just couldn't put his finger on it.

"Right, it's no problem- I'm glad you were able to come. But hey, wanna go on a little walk with me and Vesper? It's fine hanging out with everyone, but sometimes it's nice to stray off from the group too-" Asher offered, and Samson seemed to hesitate for a moment.

"... Okay, sure-" He replied eventually. Asher smiled and offered Samson a hand. He was even more hesitant to take Asher's hand, then he stood up and followed Asher as he began walking away from the camp. Vesper quickly caught up to the two of them, and they all just walked in silence for a while.

Once they were well out of sight of the campsite and a good bit down the empty trail, Asher began to hesitantly speak.

"So- Samson- do you mind if I ask you a couple of questions? Sorry, that sounds ominous- I just don't really know all that much about you, ya know?" Asher smiled a little. Really, Samson isn't really that bad.

"... Oh, uh- sure-" Samson smiled a bit back, but he seemed slightly nervous.

“Your power is telekinesis, right? How strong is it-? Daniel has telekinesis too, I was wondering if your power might develop faster working with him because of that-” Asher asked.

“Oh, yes, I honestly think my abilities can’t get much stronger than they are now-” Samson replied.

“What all can you do with it?” Vesper inquired.

“I can lift things just about as heavy as I could lift normally, but once they’re lifted they’re easier to move. I can keep carrying them for a lot longer than I could if I was just using my arms- but it does drain a good bit of energy. I’m sure to an extent it’s something like Vespers-... appendages- but my telekinesis doesn't have a physical aspect to it in the same way, like you wouldn’t feel it if I used it to lift you-” Samson responded, briefly glancing at Vesper.

“... Right- that’s pretty interesting- and Theodore- what’s his power again?” Asher asked, tilting his head to the side a bit. Samson paused for a second, staring straight ahead of them.

“He can change his voice to mimic others- he never uses it, but it’s a little spooky sometimes-” Samson responded. His tone sounded awfully distant, and he still was just looking at the trail ahead.

“Right… Samson?” Asher slowed his walking, looking directly at Samson. He felt one of Vesper’s tentacles curl around his hand soothingly.

“Yeah?”

“I know this is overstepping, but I have a really important question to ask you paired with a story of my own that I think you should know. But I- it’s not something I want Thedore to know *at all* . So I need to know, does he make you tell him all of the conversations you have? I don’t- want to have to ask you to lie, but I just- get the sense that something isn’t right when it comes to you and him-” Asher spoke with a cautious, tentative tone, watching Samsons expression closely. Samson looked more and more anxious as Asher spoke, but he nodded a little bit at the end.

“He doesn’t… *force* me… he just- I don’t like lying to him… he’s my only friend, Asher- I- I love him, he’s almost-... he’s almost like a brother to me… he was there when no one else was, you know?” Samson’s voice was soft, gentle, and Asher couldn’t help but just feel bad for him.

“Yeah, I get it… but people-... Dexter is my brother's friend, and he-... he has a way of making me think he’s the only person who could ever care about me- but it’s just not true- you learn that a little more as you gain other important people in your life…” Asher lowered his voice a little as he looked over at Vesper, who looked back with those soft purple eyes. He noticed the small smile, barely visibly smile on Vesper’s lips, and he quickly looked away before he got flustered.

“... it’s not like that…” Samson whispered, now looking at the ground.

“It is, Sam- but I’m not going to argue with you… so can you please just promise me that you won’t have to tell Theodore what I’m about to tell you..?” Asher asked softly.

“... Okay, fine-” Samson muttered.

“Thank you… So- a few months ago, I think- I was working with someone named Mr. Burton- he was a business-man, but he was also just- a horrible person. He trafficked kids with unique powers and- and did things to make them stronger-” Asher started, glancing at Vesper again.

“It was where I came from.” Vesper added, which Asher was glad for because he didn’t want to flat out say it in case Vesper wanted to keep it secret.

“Oh…” Sampson mumbled, looking at Vesper with a hint of sympathy.

“Mhm, that’s why he doesn’t have any typical hybrid parts and why his power could be so strong if he needed to use it. But- we got him out, and Burton lost his shit. He was going to-... *buy* more kids-... so to keep anyone else from suffering the same fate, I offered myself up instead. He-... the things that he did… it was awful-” Asher shuddered. “So my question is did you or Theodore go through something like that..?” Asher asked. Of course he knew the answer to that question to some extent, but he wanted the full story.

“... I-...” Samson looked around again, clearly paranoid. “Yes, sort of… it wasn’t- exactly the same- but there were people who tried to do tests to make us stronger… it didn’t really work as well, I suppose-...” Samson mumbled in response.

“Right… I’m- I’m sorry to hear it all the same- if- if you need to talk to anyone about it, you can talk to me, okay..?” Asher offered, keeping

his voice soft. He hardly even noticed that he had accidentally been using his power on Samson almost this entire time.

“Okay, thanks… I- I think I’m gonna get back to camp now, okay..?” Samson replied. Asher nodded a bit, but Samson took off back the way that they had come from before Asher had the chance to verbally respond.

“... So- that was a little odd- he- he acts so *different* when he’s not around Theodore-” Asher mumbled with a sigh, and Vesper nodded a little.

“He does. He… The way he spoke just now made me think of you, talking about Dexter. It wasn’t exactly the same, but like he thinks the same things about Theodore as you thought about Dexter. That’s why it feels familiar to you.” Vesper responded, his tentacle coiling farther up around Asher's arm.

“... What? How did you-...” Asher sort of trailed off.

“It’s become a lot easier for me to pick up on how you’re feeling, because of my power. I don’t think I can *just* control emotions, I think I can also sense them, if I focus. I really hope you don’t mind, I’ve been testing it more with you.” Vesper replied, it was at this point that he stopped walking and turned to face Asher, who stopped as well.

“Oh- no, I don’t mind at all- I- how exactly does it work? Do you need to target someone, or when you think about it do you feel everyone’s feelings when they’re in range like how it is for you to push your power onto others?” Asher asked. There was a long moment of silence as Vesper seemed to consider exactly how he was going to respond- during said moment, Vesper subconsciously leaned forward into Asher's space. And it wasn’t that Asher minded this, but he wasn’t really paying attention to what he was doing, so he just as subconsciously stepped back, not noticing how close he was to a tree behind him.

“Watch out-” Vesper mumbled, just as Asher stumbled a little over a root and fell back against the base of the tree. Vesper leaned forward as if to catch him, but instead just sort of ended up bracing himself against the tree as well, pinning Asher there.

One of Vesper’s hands was next to Asher’s head, and his other hand was right next to Asher’s waist. Vesper didn’t move, though- he just stayed put with his face inches away from Asher’s.

“I can’t do it with multiple people, just one at a time. I just need to pay close enough attention, like with you it’s easier to do if I’m looking at you. Especially your eyes.” Vesper replied softly, his deep voice for some reason caused Asher’s face to flush pink as he stared up at Vesper with slightly wide eyes.

“O-oh- I uhm- to be honest, I have- I’ve been testing something- with my powers-” Asher stammered. He stiffened slightly as Vesper shifted, carefully running his hand through Asher’s hair and just listening intently as he talked.

“I see, what is it?” Vesper asked after Asher realized he had been silent for far too long.

“Uh- i-it’s- so, whatever Theodore’s power really is, I can block it- like how I can with yours- and I can block it for other people, but it- it’s really tiring, so it’s why I’ve been sleeping so much lately- I can keep him from altering how people think- or- or at least how they act, or whatever it is that he’s doing-” Asher responded. Having something to think and talk about helped keep his mind off of his stuttering heartbeat and warm cheeks.

“That’s good information to have, perhaps using it more will make it so you’re less tired eventually. You should test it with me specifically, now that I know to pay attention.” Vesper replied, and before Asher could reply he wrapped several more tentacles around Asher’s waist and torso, then pulled them both away from the tree. Asher stumbled a little and definitely didn’t intentionally let himself fall against Vesper, leaning into him for support.

“Uh- y-yeah, for sure- I uh- I could’ve told you sooner, but I wanted to make sure that it actually worked first and I wasn’t just imagining things-” Asher replied, taking his sweet time to regain his balance. But once he had, Vesper stepped away but kept his tentacles wrapped around Asher.

“We should also be heading back now, they’ll probably be preparing food soon.” Vesper spoke softly and began walking back, gently tugging Asher along with him.

“A-alright- thanks, Vesper-” Asher smiled a bit, and Vesper just smiled softly back.

He really should take the time to consider what Chardy had said, because there was no way a friend would ever do something like that. But he never noticed Vesper blushing, or acting differently in the same

way that he did, so maybe Vesper was just being platonic and Asher was being an idiot. And that scared him, because he really didn’t want to mess things up with Vesper.

Chapter End Notes

I'm actually crying because that last bit was so choppy I'm so sorry you guys

"I love you"

Chapter Summary

> Guys idk what I am on right now to be writing chapters this quick, but it will definitely NOT last much longer. But for now, take this painfully mid chapter that I wrote before work today, and we're going to ignore how back my search history looks

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The rest of the evening went well, they all had dinner and sat around the campfire for quite a while before going to sleep in their respective tents.

Vesper and Asher had opted not to get the regular cots that were suspended about a foot off the ground- instead they had gotten these cushiony fold-up mattresses which were arguably much more comfortable. Plus, then they could push them together and it would be exactly like sharing their bed at home.

Once they were both settled in, Asher was bundled up tightly in his blanket and laying on his side facing Vesper, who had curled a few tentacles around Asher and rolled on his side to face Asher as well.

“So, what do you think of your first day camping?” Asher asked, keeping his voice low so hopefully no one would be kept up by them talking. The chilly wind outside their tent would probably help with that though.

“I enjoyed it, the forest is nice.” Vesper responded, then hesitated a moment. “It’s almost sad that we have to go back to the city after this.”

“Yeah, I know… you can really see the stars out here, but in the city they’re all blocked out by that nasty smog and light pollution. Some day though, I’m gonna leave the city- we can leave together and get a cute little house in the suburbs somewhere-” Asher spoke with a sigh.

“That would be nice…” Vesper’s voice was so soft and quiet now.

"... Have you ever gone stargazing? I know we could see them a little when we were all sitting at the fire, but the light makes them a little harder to see-" Asher asked.

"No, I don't believe I ever have. Is it nice?" Vesper replied, his eyes almost seemed to glow in the dim lighting. It was a comfortable sight, one that Asher wished he could sink deep into the feeling of and stay there forever.

"Wanna find out?" Asher smiled a bit and suddenly sat up. He was instantly hit with a freezing chill, the blanket having been the only thing keeping it out. Vesper sat up as well and grabbed an extra hoodie from his bag next to the bed. Asher had initially, reasonably, thought that Vesper was going to put the hoodie on himself, so he was slightly surprised when Vesper carefully pulled the soft fabric over Asher's head.

"Oh- thanks, you uh- you should probably wear another layer as well, it's pretty cold-" Asher mumbled, trying to ignore the way his cheeks started to warm up. It was nice how Vesper was always so *attentive* , always noticing things no one else seemed to.

"I'll be alright, I don't mind the cold much." Vesper replied, offering Asher a hand. Asher took his hand and stood up, helping Vesper up as well.

"Okay, if you're sure-" Asher said quietly, and then he opened up the zipper to the tent. It was *cold* , but Vesper's hoodie and several extra limbs curled around him definitely helped.

He signaled for Vesper to be quiet as he did his best to silently step around all potential snapping twigs or crunching leaves that could wake anyone up. He didn't usually get to be so sneaky for a harmless reason, and he was actually *enjoying* it, a big dumb smile on his face as he led Vesper out to the woods.

He wasn't exactly sure what he was looking for, just hopefully some gap in the trees somewhere. He followed a trail they hadn't gone down yet, Vesper walking silently beside him until he spotted it.

There was a little meadow surrounded by trees just a bit off of the trail, the bright moonlight casting such a nice lighting over the tall grass. Asher instantly veered off of the path and made his way out there, going towards the center of the clearing. Upon closer inspection, there were dozens of little bundles of various tiny flowers sprouting around the clusters of grass.

Luckily the grass wasn't incredibly tall, just below knee height, so when he sat down it flattened out around him and didn't block his view of the sky at all. Vesper sat beside him, looking around before locking his eyes back onto Asher.

"It's such a nice night out-" Asher whispered, looking up at the sky as he laid down on his back. Vesper hesitated a moment before doing the same. Asher didn't know much about the different constellations or which stars were which or anything, but he started pointing out different clusters and stating that they looked like certain shapes anyway.

"I mean obviously I know that some of these *are* part of actual constellations, but they really don't ever look like what they're supposed to. Like that one that's supposed to look like an eagle but it's actually just a weird looking triangle with a tail- it's so much more fun just coming up with your own, isn't it?" Asher sort of rambled. It was easy to just start talking and not stop when he talked to Vesper, because Vesper would never judge or question him the same way that someone else might.

"Yeah…" Vesper spoke softly. Asher paused for a second, then looked over to see Vesper staring directly at him.

"Pft- you're supposed to be looking at the *stars* , Vesper- that's why we came out here-" He said with a little laugh.

"But I just want to look at you." Vesper whispered, tightening his tentacles' grip around Asher's arms.

"Wh-what-?" Asher's face went bright pink as he stared at Vesper in surprise. Vesper didn't reply for a moment, but he kept watching Asher for his reaction. Then, without warning, Vesper rolled onto his side and propped himself up on his elbow, then he moved to place his other hand on the other side of Asher's head. Vesper's face was so close to Asher's that he could feel Vesper's warm breath against his face and neck, which only caused his blush to deepen.

"The stars are nice, but it will never be the same as looking into your eyes." Vesper was still whispering, and it made Asher feel all warm and fuzzy and like he couldn't quite think clearly, but in a strangely *good* way.

"Oh… I- y-your eyes are really uh- pr-pretty too-" Asher stammered, wishing he could speak as smoothly as Vesper always seemed to be able to. Vesper smiled a little, shifting to cup Asher's face in his hand

and lightly caressing his cheek with his thumb. His hand was so *warm* , Asher couldn't help the way he leaned into it.

"Thank you, stardust…" Vesper's voice hummed in a deep tone, making Asher's heartbeat stutter. He just kept looking up at Vesper, right as Vesper leaned in even closer to Asher's face and before Asher could even process it, Vesper's lips were on his.

Asher had never kissed anyone before, but it was *nice* . The way that Vesper's arms- or maybe his tentacles, since Asher was finding it a little hard to think at the moment- wrapped tightly around Asher's body, drawing him in closer. Vesper ran a hand through Asher's hair, tilting his head back to deepen the kiss.

Vesper's lips tasted like the s'mores he had eaten earlier, and with him being so close Asher could smell the faint hint of that warm campfire smell on him. Moving without really thinking, he wrapped his arms around Vesper's neck to keep him close.

But a moment later, Vesper pulled back just enough to breathe. Asher wasn't sure how long they had kissed for, but it was long enough to feel light-headed and for both of them to be panting, their breaths inter-mingling in a wispy puff of pale while in the freezing late night air. Asher shuddered as he felt a few of Vesper's tentacles snake through the fur on his wings.

Neither of them spoke for a long while, but as the fog cleared from his mind Asher felt a pang of anxiety hit him. He had grown up being told that this was *wrong* , and even after her death Asher still fought to do things that he thought his mom would be *proud* of. She wouldn't be proud of this- he wondered what exactly she would think of this. If she were alive, would she disown Asher for being this way? Would he deserve it?

He found it hard to ever believe he ever deserved good things, and he certainly didn't deserve Vesper- but that didn't make sense if he was never supposed to *want* Vesper to begin with. But he *does* want Vesper, he wants Vesper to want him, too. He wants to wake up with *Vesper* , there with him, he wants to hold hands and cuddle together on the couch- of course they already did most of those things, Asher had to remind himself. But now it was like it didn't feel *right* - like this added a whole new feeling. He didn't just want to cuddle with Vesper as a friend, he wanted Vesper to hold him close and *kiss him* .

Focusing back on Vesper, he saw that Vesper just seemed to be

watching him while he fought his internal battles. Vesper was so patient, so *gentle* , and Asher wished he could make Vesper feel as loved and cared for as Vesper made him feel *every fucking day* .

So once again, without thinking, Asher moved forward and closed the gap between them again. He kissed Vesper, clinging on to him and gripping his shirt like Vesper would just disappear if he didn't hang on hard enough, and Vesper kissed him back, and in that moment everything was *right* .

Asher could worry about what his mother would think of him later, he could think about what this meant for him as a person another time, because right now he was with *his* Vesper and nothing was going to ruin that. Not yet, not now.

The next morning Asher and Vesper were the last ones to leave their tent, being that they were definitely the last ones to return and go to sleep late into the night. They hadn't talked about what happened- the entire walk back was spent in comfortable silence and the night into early morning after they returned was just spent curled up in each other's arms, as they always were when they slept.

It was easy to act normal, like they hadn't made out and completely altered Asher's brain chemistry, but maybe that was just because there was nothing different either of them would do anyway.

The whole group had breakfast and talked about their plans for the day, mostly involving hiking around the nearby area. Samson definitely seemed to be coming out of his shell more and suggesting things for them to do, and overall it was just a nice day. They had dinner just like they had the night before, and they all went to sleep.

Asher had been incredibly tempted to ask if Vesper wanted to go "stargazing" again, but they were both pretty tired so he just settled for cuddling up next to Vesper instead. Just before he fell asleep, he'd felt Vesper press a firm kiss to the top of his head.

The next day was their last before they would pack up and go home, and as much as Asher would've loved to spend the day with Vesper again, he already decided he needed to talk to Samson again before he was back under Theodore's influence.

So after breakfast, Asher asked if he wanted to go on a walk again, and Samson agreed. They began walking down a trail they'd all

walked earlier, so they knew it would loop back somewhat quickly.

“Was there something you wanted to talk about?” Samson asked with a small smile.

“Yes, actually- well- sort of-” Asher started, his tone slightly awkward. He didn’t like being so easy to read or predict by *everyone* . *Just Vesper* . A voice whispered in the back of his mind. “I just wanted to ask about Theodore again, because- I just- I don’t want to put you in a rough spot, but I question things about him. I just-... is his power *really* voice changing? Because I- I am *positive* that it isn’t and it’s *really* important that I know what his power actually is-”

Theodore froze when Asher said that, stopping walking and turning to look at Asher with a very serious, very firm expression. Asher stopped as well, but he wished he hadn’t as Samson took a step forward into Asher’s personal space. Asher seriously regretted not bringing Vesper along this time- Samson wasn’t acting normal, he was acting like a caged animal, and it was intimidating.

“What makes you say that, Asher? That’s what Theodores power is, everyone knows that- everyone believes it.” Samson spoke in a low, almost threatening tone as he leaned over Asher. He wasn’t much taller than Asher like most of the others were, but Samson got his point across just the same.

“Well, I don’t. So what’s his real power?” Asher asked, attempting to use his ability to sway Samson. He thought it might work for a moment when Samson paused, but then his expression hardened and he glared down at Asher.

“His power is changing his voice. Nothing else. That’s why experiments on him didn’t work like they did on you or Vesper. There’s not much more powerful that it can get, I thought you’d be smart enough to understand that.” Samson snapped back.

“I don’t believe you, Samson. Come on- we can work together, can’t we? Theodore clearly doesn’t care what’s in your best interest, he’s–” Asher started, once again trying to use his ability, but Samson cut him off.

“–my family. He’s my family, like a brother to me. You’re just a stranger who has *no* right to be asking these questions.” Samson spoke in a chilling tone, shoving Asher back. He stumbled and nearly fell, but managed to catch himself. The fur on his wings fluffed up like the hackles on a cat, and he glared back at Samson.

“Don’t touch me.” He snapped, stepping forwards until he was practically standing on Samsons toes.

“Then don’t talk about my *brother* .” Samson hissed.

Asher watched him for a moment with a scrutinizing gaze before he relented and turned away, quickly walking off back down the trail. He listened closely for any footsteps, but it sounded like Samson was heading off in a different direction.

Asher was quiet for a while once he got back to the main group, especially once Samson came back as well. It was made a little more bearable when Amelia began talking about what she wanted to do, which today happened to be going to see a waterfall.

No one else seemed particularly interested, which clearly disappointed her, so Asher spoke up.

“I’ll go with you, Amelia-” He said softly, and she smiled brightly.

“Perfect! Let’s get going, I want to be back before it’s time to pack up and go-” She replied, grabbing Asher’s hand. He waved goodbye to Vesper before he was dragged off into the woods on a painfully uphill trail.

He was already winded pretty quickly into it, but Amelia's tail happily swished behind her as her long legs carried her much faster than Asher was capable of. She did take notice of him falling behind though, and she paused to look back at him.

“Are you alright kid?” She asked, hardly even breathing heavier than usual.

“I’m uh- I’m fine, not a kid though-” He smiled a bit, giving a half-hearted thumbs up. He flapped his wings a bit to give him a little boost, and to get his blood flowing quicker in hopes that it would boost his adrenaline.

“We can stop and rest if you want-” She offered, waiting until he had caught up with her to continue walking.

“Nah, I’ll rest at the waterfall. I just hate climbing stairs, and this hike seems to be damn-near perfectly replicating that sensation-” He forced a small chuckle.

She seemed to accept this answer and they both continued walking for

a total of about forty-five minutes until they made it close enough to hear the waterfall. It was *loud* , so they probably wouldn't be doing much talking.

Amelia was nearly skipping to get over to the body of water- the pool below the waterfall was big, with a few smaller streams trickling off of it. But the waterfall was *huge* , with a few different layers over it and the water cascading down in a blinding white flurry. Mist floated off of all the various areas that the water violently slammed into the rocks.

If he looked hard enough, the sunlight made a very pretty rainbow effect against the mist. Asher couldn't help but wish that Vesper was here, but he had a feeling Vesper had chosen to stay behind for a reason.

Looking over at Amelia, she was circling around the main body of water to get closer to the actual waterfall part. He watched her for a while, as she was wrapped up so elegantly in that chilly mist. Somehow she just seemed to fit in so well with this setting, with something so dangerous but so beautiful.

Once again he couldn't help but to think of his mother as he watched her. And once again he was hit with a feeling of fear, thinking about how his mom would see him now.

But Amelia wasn't his mom, and Amelia would be accepting of Asher liking Vesper the way that he did. Probably.

It was easier to separate the two people in his mind with the more time that he spent with Amelia- she was *so* different than his mom was. It was probably a good thing honestly, and she was pretty fun to hang out with. He briefly wondered why on earth Lance didn't just enjoy spending enough time with her to go camping even if he disliked it.

He hesitated a moment before stretching out his wings, shivering a little from the blast of cold that hit them. He flapped his wings a few times, lifting himself up off of the ground before flying over the water.

It was beautiful- the reflecting of his wings and the sky off of the rippling, somewhat clear water was mesmerizing. He noticed Amelia turning to watch him, shuffling her own wings a little. They had never talked about it, but he was pretty sure that Amelia wasn't able to fly. Her all white wings were pretty, but they were too small for her

somewhat muscular and tall body. She was likely able to glide, though.

He flapped a few more times to bring himself higher up to the top of the falls, landing next to the river that created them. The grass was moist and spongy beneath his feet, and everything around the water was so alive and green.

He looked down at Amelia and was slightly surprised to see her beginning to climb up the rocks to get to the top of the waterfall.

“Careful!” He shouted down, watching with mild anxiety. If she fell, he definitely wouldn’t be able to carry her- and it would take *way* too long for him to have to go all the way back to the group to get help, even if he flew there.

But she was fine, clearly pretty good at rock climbing as she made her way to the top and stood next to Asher, panting as she looked around.

“Wow, this place is gorgeous-” She mumbled breathlessly.

“Isn’t it?” He replied, slightly giddy as he walked away from the loud, crashing water. Amelia followed him over to the treeline- all of the trees were absolutely massive up here, large sprawling oaks covered in moss and ferns. It was all so serene, peaceful.

He glanced over at Amelia again and saw her kneeling over an old fallen tree trunk- it was coated in even more moss than the living trees, and it even had a few mushrooms sprouting from it. They were all standing mostly alone, away from each other with long light brown stems and a darker cap. Amelia was looking them over, lightly running her fingers over the caps of them.

“Mushrooms-” He said quietly, crouching down next to her with his tail swishing over a bundle of ferns behind them.

“Conocybe filaris, very deadly when they’re eaten- more commonly known as ‘shaggy mane’ mushrooms though-” She said with a soft hum.

“Really? Any chance we can harvest and dry them?” He asked, half jokingly.

“Pft- I wish, but I don’t think there’s a safe way to do it. Plus, what would we say to everyone else-? ‘Oh yes, just thought they looked pretty and so why not’?” She replied with a little laugh. Her laugh was

nice, so light and airy.

“You’re probably right, but it’s cool- I’m sure natural poisons would work so much better than chemicals too, huh?” He sighed.

“Oh yeah, for sure-” She paused. “Why does that matter, though?” She narrowed her eyes and looked over at Asher.

“... Oh, well uh- I just- I’m interested in poisons, they’re pretty cool to learn about-” He scrambled. It wasn’t a lie, he honestly did want to learn more- he just didn’t need to tell her *exactly* why.

“Really? Oh my god I *love* learning about different toxins, you should’ve told me! I’ve got books I can lend you and everything, if you’re interested-” She smiled brightly.

“Seriously? I- I would love that, actually-” He smiled back, his wings fluffing up a bit.

“Yeah, for sure! We’ll have to plan something- I’ll tell Daniel too so it can count towards your training-” She replied cheerfully. He made a quick mental note to remember exactly what her normal cheerful tone sounded like, so he’d be able to tell if it was fake later.

“Thank you- ya know, for being one of my brother's friends, you’re actually really cool-” He laughed a bit.

“Pft- well that’s because your brother is lame as fuck, and I’m a much cooler person. But anyways-” She paused and pulled out her phone to check the time. “We had probably better get heading back- I want to pack up our stuff soon and get started on the walk back so we don’t have to rush-”

“Alright, sounds good. Can you glide down or do I need to stand up here and watch you?” He asked, standing up and brushing himself off as he headed back over to the waterfall.

“I can glide, just not for very long before I start to lose my balance-” She replied, following after him.

They both fell silent as it became too loud for them to hear each other, but Asher watched as she tossed herself over the rocky ledge and gracefully floated down to the ground again. He waited a second before taking off after her, landing softly beside her and sticking his now freezing hands into his pockets.

The walk back was nice, they talked about various different poisons to get an idea of just how much Asher knew already and how much she would have to teach him.

That conversation died off once they made it back to the campsite of course, and they began packing up all of their things.

When they went home later that day, Asher wouldn't even look at Samson- but other than that everything else was pretty much normal. No one else seemed to notice the situation, luckily. Well- except for Vesper of course, but Asher had already promised to fill him in once they were home and away from everyone.

Once they got there, they helped everyone move everything inside and then everyone departed to go and do their own things.

He did his best to ignore the glare from Theodore when they all flooded out of the elevator, instead just smiling and waving a bit at Chardy, who smiled a bit back.

He headed off to his room with Vesper, and they were both pretty quiet as they unpacked their things.

"What happened with Samson?" Vesper asked once they were done. Asher hesitated a moment before going to sit on the bed, watching Vesper as he neatly folded up some of the clean laundry they had left behind before leaving.

It was such a nice, comforting sight to be there with Vesper, just doing normal and domestic things. He felt like he could be happy going the whole rest of his life with nothing big or important ever happening again, just living happy and peacefully with Vesper.

"Well-... I tried to ask him about Theodores power, and he uh- he sort of got a little defensive-" Asher started, his tone quiet. Realistically he knew that no one would likely be listening, but he still felt paranoid.

"What do you mean?" Vesper's tone shifted a little, sounding a bit darker.

"He said Theodore was his family, and he kinda got all up in my space and shoved me-" Asher responded.

In what felt like less than a second, Vesper had crossed the room and was now standing over Asher. Vesper leaned down and cupped Asher's face in his hands, looking him over with a concerned expression. He went slightly pink as he watched Vesper.

"Why didn't you tell me right away? Are you hurt?" Vesper sounded so worried.

"I- I'm okay, it was just a small shove- if he had *really* done anything serious I would have told you right away-" Asher replied, trying to sound comforting as he brought a hand up to gently grab one of Vespers, pulling it away from his face and holding it tightly.

"... You should've told me immediately, I don't want you to go anywhere alone with Samson." Vesper said in a firm, but still gentle tone.

"Okay- I'm sorry, dove… I promise I'll bring you with from now on, okay?" He smiled softly up at Vesper. Something about Vesper being so protective made butterflies form in Asher's stomach, which was probably the only reason he didn't argue that he could defend himself like he would've had pretty much anyone else said that to him.

Or maybe it was just the *way* that Vesper spoke- he wasn't demeaning Asher when he wanted to protect him, he just simply *wanted* to.

"Thank you-" Vesper sighed, leaning forward and kissing Asher on the forehead. Asher's blush deepened as he shifted to pull Vesper into a hug.

Instead of hugging him back, Vesper nudged Asher farther back onto the bed and crawled on top of him, his legs on either side of Asher's. He also wrapped a few of his tentacles around Asher's arms and legs at the same time as he began stroking one of his wings with his hand.

Asher went bright red as he looked up at Vesper, his entire body warming under Vesper's soothing touch. Vesper smiled softly down at him and leaned in close, using the hand that wasn't on his wing to stroke his hair.

"Are you alright? You're looking a little red-" Vesper smirked. Asher *really* didn't think Vesper would be the teasing type, and right now it left him speechless, which only seemed to amuse Vesper more. "You're adorable, love." His tone softened as he pulled back a little, much to Asher's disappointment.

“Th-thanks-” Asher hated the way that his voice came out so high-pitched and shaky. He wrapped his arms around Vesper in attempts to keep him closer.

Vesper hummed in response and kept gently stroking Asher’s wing, falling silent for a while.

“... I really care about you, Asher. You are the most important person to me, and I–” Vesper started, but Asher spoke over him.

“I love you-” He blurted out, surprising both Vesper and himself. There was a moment of silence before he continued. “I-... I just- didn’t realize that’s what it was for like- a really long time- because I- I’ve been told my whole life that- that relationships are supposed to just be a guy and a girl, and- I just assumed every time that I felt nervous around you, or excited to see you or- or anything like that, I just thought it was how friends are supposed to feel- but I- I love you-” He stammered, trying to keep his thoughts clear long enough to get all of what he wanted to say out there.

He felt anxiety beginning to creep into the corners of his mind as Vesper remained silent for a moment too long, but before Asher could think to speak again and potentially backtrack, Vesper finally spoke.

“I love you too, Asher… I’m glad to hear you say it. I was starting to think I was misreading signals and that you didn’t feel the way I thought you did-” Vesper whispered back, a soft smile playing on his lips.

“Sorry…” Asher breathed with a small chuckle, his gaze drifting down to Vesper's lips, remembering how they had felt on his own.

“No need, my love…” Vesper replied, finally, *finally* leaning in to close the space between them. Vesper kissed Asher, and Asher more than happily kissed him back.

Chapter End Notes

> SO THAT ACTUALLY WASN'T SUPPOSED TO HAPPEN. I was NOT supposed to make them "official" yet, it was just supposed to be a little scandalous kiss that they ignore after that but what's done is done now, and this is bringing us to a rapid end to the domestic fluff chapters because I have got a rapid fire of major events coming up

Friendly fire

Chapter Summary

> Asher enters survival mode so that's why everything doesn't seem like a super big deal, but it's poorly written I'm sorry :')
> Everyone has a conversation, Asher and Daniel talk, Calypso makes several appearances, and everything is suspicious. Also some much needed therapy :D
> Little special guest appearance at the end I don't wanna spoil

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The very next morning, everyone was summoned for breakfast. The delicious pancakes and bacon were almost worth having to sit across from Samson and nearby Theodore who would not stop *talking* to Chardy.

About halfway through, Daniel spoke up over everyone's smalltalk.

“Alright, I think it’s about time we all talk over something pretty important that was decided while some of you guys were away camping,” He began, then paused until he was sure he had everyone's attention. “Amelia, you knew about this mission already, but some more details have been uncovered. There is a very significant and pretty big organization of people who are working to do something very similar to what Mr. Burton was doing before he passed.”

There was a long pause in the air after he said that. Asher hadn’t realized that Daniel had been doing his own research on this- maybe he should consider giving Daniel a copy of his hard drive.

“So what’s the mission?” Lance asked, his voice low and cautious.

“Well, nothing is incredibly urgent since they don’t currently have any victims to test on, so at the moment we need to gather information. I’m going to send in two people at a time on a total of three trips spanned out over the next week and a half. During which, each person will be given empty flash drives, a good camera, and obviously some sort of weapons to protect yourself. This will only be happening after-hours, but there are still very high levels of security and round the

clock guards. That being said, before the actual three missions I'll be sending a group of three or four to look over the place and make sure the tips I got on it were all correct." Daniel answered.

"Who is expected to go on each of these?" Victor asked, looking half asleep still. His hair was all mussed up and his eyes were half-lidded.

"Francis has already volunteered to go on the first recon trip, and it's much lower stakes so whoever else volunteers can go as well. As for the first mission, I've planned for Chardy and Theodore to go, then–" Daniel spoke, and Asher cut him off.

"What??" He asked, his voice was slightly strangled seeing as he had been mid-bite.

"What's the matter?" Daniel asked, his tone was a little bit odd.

" *Theodore* ?? No way should he or Samson be doing any missions- you were all *pissed* when I started working with Burton, which at the time was not *nearly* as dangerous as this." Asher responded, his tone firm.

"That was a very different situation, you know-" Lance interjected, which seriously surprised Asher since Lance had been the one to give the most push-back on Asher before.

Then he got a thought- that was probably Theodore's fault. So he'd have to fix that- he began envisioning building that wall again, protecting Lance from Theodore's influence. But it was like he felt something *blocking* him- like there was already a wall there, keeping *him* out. He looked over at Theodore, who had a smug little look as he glanced back at Asher, looking like the cat that ate the canary. So his usual plan wouldn't work, apparently Theodore could block it if he got there first, but perhaps his ability could still help him.

"I disagree. I can look back now and say that when I involved myself, it wasn't the right thing to do- but just because I did it, that doesn't mean that *this* is okay. Besides I don't think Theodore's ability will be particularly useful there, and I doubt his like two weeks of training with Daniel will give him enough experience for this-" Asher just tried to keep talking as long as possible, pushing as much of his power into his voice as possible.

But as he spoke, he knew that something was wrong. Lance's expression wasn't right- he didn't look like he was listening to Asher, he just looked like what Asher was saying was pissing him off. Sure, maybe he could deserve to get a little annoyed at Asher, but right now

he just looked *livid* . His wings flared up and Asher could feel the heat next to him- it caused Vesper to recoil away since he was sitting between Asher and Lance.

“Why the fuck do you *always* have to have a fucking problem?? Why don’t you just mind your own business for *once* ?!” Lance shouted. Asher looked up at him with wide eyes, beyond startled as no one said anything. He didn’t know what the hell Theodore was doing to them, but damn he must be *powerful* .

“I don’t have a problem, Lance- please just listen to me-” Asher continued, trying to keep his voice as steady as possible.

“Just- just shut up!” Lance snapped back. “Everyone else is fucking *fine* , *you* are the one causing issues-!”

“I’m only causing issues because Theodore is here fucking brainwashing you guys, and no one else seems to notice it but me!” Asher yelled back, standing up so abruptly that he damn near knocked over the chair he had been sitting on.

Theodore snapped his head around to look at Asher, but he didn’t look worried.

“What are you talking about, Asher? Everyone’s fine-” Theodore’s tone was so painfully sweet that it made Asher want to throw up. It was so *fake* . And why the *fuck* did people keep saying that ‘everyone else’ was fine??

“You know *exactly* what I’m talking about! You’ve been lying to everyone- but *I* know- I know who you are because I talked to one of the people who tested on you-!” Asher snapped back.

“Calm down, Asher- what are you talking about?” Daniel spoke in a soothing tone.

“Fucking- damnit! No one’s going to believe me-” He was trying to stall now, he started trying to build up the wall around Vesper. He just needed *someone* to really see and understand what the fuck was going on, without having their minds altered to tell them that whatever this was was normal.

“Will you just quit causing shit and sit the fuck back down??” Lance demanded, glaring down at Asher. Asher tried to be quick with his reply, but his mind was working a little slower now as he fought to free Vesper of the invisible shackles of Theodore’s increasingly

frustrating ability.

“Will you just *listen* to what I’m saying and stop letting *him* block out what I mean??” Asher shot back, turning to Lance with an almost pleading expression now.

“I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about, you’re acting *crazy* .” Lance hissed back. Asher just stared at him in silence for a moment- it wasn’t *working* . His ability didn’t matter if Theodore got to them first- and he was having no luck with Vesper, who was sitting there just staring off into the distance.

Not knowing what else to do, he just went to storm off, out of the dining room. Lance reached out and grabbed onto his wrist, and Asher was violently snapped into a very bad headspace that he did *not* want to be in.

He needed to *get away* . He yanked himself away from Lance and stumbled away, his eyes wide with fear.

For a second, just a second, it looked like there was a flash of *something* in Lance’s eyes- some sort of recognition. But Asher couldn’t trust what he *thought* he was seeing right now, so as soon as he was free he darted off to his room and shut the door upon seeing that Vesper hadn’t even attempted to follow him.

“Shit- shitshitshitshitshit-” He whispered, his hands trembling as he pressed himself against the door and slid down to the ground. His hands were shaky as they ran them through his own hair, desperately trying to recreate the feeling of being comforted by someone else.

“Fuck- god damnit, I can’t- *how* ??” He whispered as he felt red hot tears stinging his eyes. He was panicking, and he *didn’t understand* . Theodore *had* to have some sort of mind control, and how the hell was Asher supposed to compete with that?

He dug his nails into the skin on his arms, clawing them until little trails of blood sprang up in uneven, jagged lines across his arms. His breathing was too quick, and his vision was blurry as he suddenly felt something warm against one of his hands.

Jolting back, he looked over at the warm object and was surprised to see Calypso, standing on their hind legs with their front paws rested on Asher’s leg, so that she could reach Asher’s hand to attempt to nudge it away from his arm.

“Oh, holy shit…” He panted, trying to fully catch his breath. Seeing the little dragon had startled him enough to sort of abruptly snap him out of his panic. He smiled a little as he reached out and gently scooped him up- he hadn’t seen Calypso in a while, likely a few weeks now that he was thinking back on it.

“Holy shit, Caly… you have no idea how glad I am to see you…” He whispered as he gently stroked her fur. She made a sound somewhere between a chitter and a purr as she nuzzled her face against his hand, simultaneously wrapping her tail around Asher’s wrist.

“You would not fucking *believe* what’s been going on, girl… Theodore is *brainwashing* everyone and- and I think my power is making it so it doesn’t work on me, but I can’t- I can’t stop it from working on the others anymore-” He explained softly. The dragon tilted their head to the side and gave a small noise of sympathy and understanding.

Asher cradled her against his chest and opened his mouth to speak again, but before he could there was a small knock against the door. He jumped a little, lunging himself forward and away from the door as his hands began to shake again.

“... Come in-” He whispered, praying that it was just Vesper. That little prayer was crushed as the door opened, and Daniel stood in the hallway outside. Oh well, that wasn’t the worst person it could’ve been.

“Hey, kid- can we talk?” Daniel asked, but it was *not right* . It was *wrong* and it wasn’t *his* voice, and it was making his heart rate increase rapidly.

“... Can- can we go up to the roof?” He asked, his voice was more than a little shaky. Calypso trilled softly and climbed up to perch himself on Asher’s shoulder, her tiny claws digging into Asher’s shirt as he struggled slightly to stand up.

“Of course…” Daniel replied softly, offering Asher a hand. He hesitated a moment- if this was some sort of mind control, that meant a bit of Theodore was in Daniel’s head right now, and he wanted *nothing* to do with Theodore touching him, even if it was through a body that wasn’t his own. But, he wanted some semblance of comfort, so he took Daniels hand anyway and began quickly walking to the stairs.

Daniel followed after him and tried to ask a few times what was wrong, but Asher didn’t say a *word* . He just waited until they were up

on the roof to begin trying to build his wall again, to defend Daniel from Theodore. It was easier now- he could crumble whatever defense Theodore had put up and replace it with his own.

Already he could feel the energy drain, so he led Daniel to sit with their backs leaning against one of the walls that made up the room to the staircase leading up here. The wind was loud, hopefully it blocked out his shaky and uneven breaths as he continued to keep a good chunk of his focus and energy on ensuring Daniel was *Daniel.*

But it was working, when he turned to Daniel he was met with the same soft, *familiar* gaze he had come to expect.

“What’s going on, Asher..?” Daniel asked softly, and before responding he just hugged Daniel tightly- Calypso jumped off of his shoulder and onto the ground to avoid being crushed. Daniel seemed slightly surprised, but hugged Asher back, wrapping him up in warmth and security for just a moment.

“Look, Daniel-... I don’t want people to think I’m crazy- I- there’s something *wrong* with Theodore-” Asher started, pulling away enough so that he could look up at Daniel and see his reaction. Something shifted, and he suddenly looked much more defensive- just as Samson had when he brought up Theodore.

“What are you talking about?” Daniel asked, his tone was quiet and cold as his grip tightened on Asher, only now it didn’t feel comforting. Now it felt like a *trap* - he struggled to try and get away, but Daniel wasn’t letting go of him.

“I- n-nothing, nevermind- just- forget it-” He mumbled, his voice a little high pitched as deep fear coursed through his veins.

Daniel seemed to relax because of that though, so he loosened his grip on Asher and he was able to slip away. He realized he’d lost a bit of his focus on the internal barrier, and it somehow felt *weaker* just from that. He was having an internal war with Theodore over Daniel’s headspace *actively* .

“I… I think, maybe- maybe it would be better for me to go with Chardy instead of Theodore-” He began, watching Daniel’s expression closely so he’d see the *exact* second that Daniel began to look defensive again. “Not- not because of anything wrong with Theodore, I just- I’ve really missed Chardy- and I think it’s about time for me to get back onto the field, and you said you only wanted us to go in pairs…”

“Oh, well-... I don’t know, Asher. You’re still not really doing all that well mentally, I’m just not totally sure you’re ready for it, especially with this mission being so high stakes and relating to the exact thing that you’ve been trying to heal from-” Daniel spoke softly, and without thinking Asher brought a hand up to his own neck, lightly tracing over the scars left behind there.

“I- I can do it, Daniel- I promise-” It was so weird talking to Daniel, comforting, *safe* Daniel who was being so gentle and trying to take care of him, but also just *knowing* that he was a few wrong words away from that same Daniel snapping and becoming aggressive.

“... Well- maybe you’re ready, if you really want to. But I’m not sending you and Chardy alone in that case- Theodore will still go with you-” Daniel decided after a moment of thinking, and internally Asher cringed a little.

“Are- are you sure? I *really* think I can do it-” Asher pushed some of his ability into his tone, but he was getting *really* tired- it was hard to focus.

“I’m sure, it’s decided. And-...” Daniel paused for a moment. “There’s this group therapy thing I saw for teenagers and young adults specifically with medical trauma- they won’t all have the same issues as you, but I really feel like going could do you some good… So you can go on this mission, but I want you to at least attend one or two of these sessions just to see how you feel about it, okay?” Daniel’s tone was firm, he wasn’t going to budge on this one.

“... Okay- fine- but you know I don’t like the idea of therapy…” Asher mumbled.

“I know, Asher- but I really think that this will help you…” Daniel spoke softly, setting a hand on Asher’s shoulder. He was so fucking *tired* now, he just wanted to go to sleep. Calypso seemed to know that, as she kept nudging him and making noises and skittering around as if to distract him and keep him awake.

“Okay… I’m- ‘m gonna go back inside now-” He muttered and pushed himself up, using the wall for balance. Calypso crawled up his leg, then his torso, and settled herself on his shoulder again.

The dragon was so light, but right now the weight of her felt like the weight of the world as he headed back down the stairs to his room. Or maybe it was the crushing reality that he was *truly* alone right now.

When he got to his room, Vesper was there and acting normally- maybe a touch concerned, and he truly *seemed* normal. Maybe Vesper's ability blocked him from being truly *controlled* at least when Theodore wasn't right next to him- but Asher didn't have the energy left to discuss everything that just happened, so he simply collapsed into bed and curled up in Vesper's arms.

He got a decent little nap before waking up feeling a bit more energized. He checked his phone to see that he had a message from Daniel, it was sent shortly after he assumed he'd fallen asleep.

"Hey Asher, I didn't want to wake you. You need to meet with Theodore and Chardy in Chardy's room at some point to discuss the details of the mission. I already had time to discuss it with them during your camping trip, and I let them know you would be joining them and to accommodate accordingly, so you need to be filled in on the plan and help make whatever required changes." Was all he had sent.

Asher sighed and tossed his phone to the side, glancing over at Vesper who was watching him with a slightly concerned expression.

"I need to go talk to Chardy and Theodore about the mission or whatever-..." Asher mumbled, and Vesper instantly sat up, wrapping a few tentacles around Asher's arms.

"I'm coming with you. If we can't trust you alone with Samson, you certainly can't be alone with Theodore." Vesper spoke in a firm tone.

"... I mean, I wouldn't be alone, Chardy will be there-" Asher mumbled, for some reason he was very slightly annoyed.

"I don't think that will help you much, and I want to be there." Vesper doubled down, so Asher ceased arguing. Instead he just went about cleaning himself up a bit before they went down the hall to Chardy's room, and Asher softly knocked on the door.

"Come in-" Chardy hummed cheerfully from inside. Asher opened the door and briefly looked around- his room was very nicely put together as always, and Chardy was sitting on the floor with a paper sprawled out in front of them. It looked like some sort of roughly drawn blueprints for the general layout of the building, probably sketched off of the actual blueprints they had for some parts of the place.

"Hello- Vesper's gonna sit in just so he knows what's going on-" Asher

mumbled. His tone was a little awkward and quiet as he looked at Theodore, who gave a fake little smile and waved a bit.

Chardy sighed and his expression seemed mildly disappointed as he glanced at Vesper, then looked at Asher.

“Alright, well then come and sit down. But I don’t know if Daniel wants Vesper knowing the details-” Chardy murmured the last bit a little quieter.

“He’s not going to tell anyone, and he deserves to know.” Asher snapped back, but his tone wasn’t particularly harsh like it usually would be.

Chardy just nodded a little, not verbally responding as Asher and Vesper went to sit on the opposite side of the paper to Theodore and Chardy.

“So, what’s the plan?” Asher asked after a long moment of awkward quiet.

“The three of us are going to enter here through this back door-” Chardy began, pointing at a spot on the paper. He led into a rather long explanation that Asher did his best to pay close attention to, scanning over the papers over and over to memorize the layout. It was a pretty long conversation- luckily one that really only Asher and Chardy partook in.

Chardy seemed *almost* normal during most of this, like Theodore wasn’t holding a firm control over him at the moment but more like just idly existing in his mind. It was creepy to think about though, and Asher fucking *hated* it.

Towards the end of the conversation when they were just confirming exactly what time and day they were going to be doing this, Theodore spoke up.

“It’s supposed to be pretty poor weather that day- either snow or rain, so better wear a few layers. You’re smaller than me and Char, so you’ll probably be affected worse-” Theodore spoke in a tone that was clearly *supposed* to sound nice and caring, but it was just *wrong* .

“He’ll be fine, he can handle himself.” Vesper spoke firmly before Asher could reply. Asher glanced over at him, feeling annoyance bubble up in his chest. *Why* ? He shouldn’t be annoyed at Vesper for standing up for him.

Theodore raised an eyebrow, glancing over at Vesper before giving Chardy a look that Asher didn't quite understand.

"Just a warning, no need to be defensive." Theodore shrugged a bit, and Chardy shot Asher an annoyed look.

The air in the room had grown tense, and they were finished up with their meeting anyways so Asher stood up and offered Vesper a hand.

"Alright, well I think that's everything then. We'll reconvene after the first scout trip happens tomorrow, I'm sure-" Asher mumbled as Vesper stood as well.

"Indeed, I'll see you later then Asher-" Chardy spoke with a sigh. Asher just nodded a bit before leaving, still holding Vesper's hand as they left and went back to his room, where Calypso was patiently waiting.

He'd almost regretted not bringing her to the meeting too, but he had no clue how she'd react to Theodore and she always seemed so overly affectionate of everyone in a way Asher *refused* to let her be with someone like Theodore.

The next morning was that therapy session Daniel wanted Asher to attend, so as soon as he rolled out of bed he had to get ready for it. Lance had offered to drive him there, so for almost half an hour they'd just have to sit uncomfortably in the car together.
Lance always seemed to act the strangest out of everyone other than Samson when Theodore was around, and Asher could only wonder why.

"So-... do you think that this will actually help you at all?" Lance asked eventually, turning down whatever music had been playing on the radio.

Asher was sitting in the front passenger seat, leaned against the window with a very dull expression. Honestly he didn't really think it would help all that much, but he was at a point now where he actually didn't mind trying things like this to just feel better.

"I don't know, maybe-" He shrugged a bit. Calypso was tucked safely into Vesper's hoodie he was wearing over his sweater, luckily all the bunches of fabric were big enough that the dragon could hide safely and not be seen from any outside perspective unless he moved too

much.

“Well- I hope that it does, really. I did a bit of a background check, it’s got some great reviews and most people stop going after a few years of consistent visits- probably a good sign, yeah?” Lance asked, offering a small smile.

“Hm, yeah- I’m really gonna give it a try this time, but I just-... I’m a bit nervous about other people being there- I don’t like sharing vulnerabilities with people I don’t know, ya know? And I’m gonna have to lie about a lot of things-...” Asher sighed, shifting away from the window and slumping back against his seat.

“I understand- I think part of what’s supposed to make it work is that *everyone* is sharing their vulnerabilities, so it kinda reminds you that everyone is human and everyone has issues- and thinking logically about it, no one will use anything you say against you because you could just as easily use what they’re saying against them if you needed to.” Lance replied softly.

It made sense, and for the first time in a long time Asher actually felt genuinely comforted by what Lance was saying. Ironic, considering just yesterday he ran out of a room terrified Lance was going to try to hurt him. Although that did beg the question, was it really *Lance* he was scared of if Lance was being controlled?

The rest of the car ride was in silence, and when they pulled up to a small office-type building, Lance stopped the car outside the clear glass doors.

“Alright, this is it. Do you want me to go in with you or do you want to go alone?” Lance asked, and Asher hesitated a moment.

“... I’ll go in alone, thank you- do uh- do you know where I’m supposed to go?” Asher asked back.

“Yeah, there’s a desk right when you walk in and the meeting room is in a hallway to the left of that, past the bathrooms. There should be a wood door with a clouded window, it’ll have words on it saying ‘Group Therapy Sessions’-” Lance answered.

“Okay, I’ll uh- see you in an hour- bye-” Asher mumbled as he opened the door and slipped out of the car, tucking his hands into his pockets as he headed to the doors.

There was a receptionist lady at the desk who waved at Asher when

he walked in, he just smiled a bit back and headed left down the hallway as he was instructed to. She didn't say anything, so she must be used to people already knowing their way around here.

It seemed like one of those buildings that just long-term rented out their rooms to different buildings and people- hopefully there weren't a lot of cameras around here, especially not audio-recording ones.

His wings shuffled a bit self-consciously against his back as he curled his tail around one of his legs.It was a nervous habit, and he really didn't like it because it made him look stupid.

When he found the door, he read over the stupid sign on it like four times to really, *really* make sure it was the correct room. He couldn't hear anything inside, and there was no one else in the hallway to judge him for standing in front of this door for like two whole minutes trying to work up the courage to open it.

This was so stupid, he shouldn't be so nervous about this.

He pushed open the door and stepped inside, relieved to see that he was in fact in the right place. There was a big circle of nearly two dozen chairs- a chunk of them were occupied already. There was a little table with some generic chips and store-bought desserts for snacks, as well as a big water dispenser and a cooler that Asher assumed had some other kinds of drinks.

A man who he assumed was the counselor here was standing near the snack table with a younger, professional looking woman. She was short, round, and wearing a more feminine version of a suit sort of like Tina's- huh, he had forgotten about her. He wondered how she was doing now- and as he got lost in that thought he realized someone was speaking to him.

The counselor- he had moved to stand in front of Asher and was talking to him with a kind smile. He had one of those "Hello! My name is:" stickers on the right side of his chest, and apparently his name was Albert.

He blinked up at Albert, slightly dazed. The man's eyes were a nice shade of brown- lighter than Lance's eyes, but still a little dark. His hair was brown as well, but turning gray at the roots, though it was hidden pretty well in the smooth way he styled it.

"... Sorry- what?" He mumbled quietly. Albert's expression developed a little touch of concern, but he was still smiling.

“Hello, dear- my name is Albert. What’s your name?” Albert repeated. His voice was nice- deep, a little gruff from his age, but very sincere- and not in the weird, fake way that most of his previous therapists had been either.

“I’m uh- Asher-” He mumbled back.

“Excellent, please put your name on the clipboard, and feel free to grab some snacks while we wait for the rest of our group to arrive- the counseling part actually begins in about ten minutes-” Albert spoke gently.

Asher nodded a bit and headed over to the snack table, which upon closer inspection had a clipboard with a list of eleven names, twelve after Asher wrote his down.

He took a seat in a chair as far from everyone as possible and just sort of waited there. He was comforted by the feeling of Calypso purring against his chest, but she was doing her best not to move so she wouldn’t be visible.

After what must’ve been close to ten minutes, the professional looking woman from before left the room and Albert took his seat. He skimmed over the clipboard, then looked around briefly as if he were confused for a moment.

Before he could voice whatever was causing his confusion, the door to the room swung open which caused nearly every head to snap over towards it.

Looking slightly flustered, a very familiar face rushed through the doorway and to an empty seat right next to Asher. It was the *barista* - from that day with Klaus- she was wearing a nametag that day, but Asher couldn’t recall her name for the life of him at the moment.

“Ah, Celine- late again-” Albert spoke, but he was smiling and he certainly didn’t sound actually upset. She smirked, tossing her scuffed up brown backpack onto the ground below her seat.

She looked different now than she had at work- she had makeup, and Asher didn’t know much about it but he thought the colors for her eyeshadow were cool. They were glittery blue, pink and yellow, with somewhat dramatic eyeliner to match. It brought out her eyes, which he supposed was probably the point.

Her style was interesting too- not entirely unlike Asher’s when it came

to the baggier clothes, but hers actually seemed to be some sort of style and not just random shit he thought was comfortable. She had a black t-shirt with a big skull on the middle and a somewhat torn denim jacket, and ripped jeans with some sort of fishnet material in the areas they were ripped.

He hadn't really paid too much attention to it before, but now that she wasn't behind a counter he could see that she had a long lion tail and a pair of lion ears atop her head. They were both pierced with various black and silver hoops or spikes, all just adding to the overall somewhat edgy vibe she had.

"Oh Al, you know I don't believe in being late. Time is relative, after all-" She said with a thick layer of sarcasm in her tone. Her voice made him think of a much less exaggerated and more mild version of a "new jersey" accent- he must've not noticed it before because of her curated customer service tone, but now her voice was a little deeper and overall more natural sounding.

She smoothed out her slightly messy hair with her hands, and Asher noticed that her nails had been repainted a deep shade of purple.

She must've noticed him staring, because she sort of looked him up and down and a brief hint of recognition flashed in her eyes before she turned her attention back to Albert, who had cleared his throat to regain everyone's attention.

"Alright, alright. Let's get started now, shall we?" He asked softly, scribbling something down on the clipboard- Asher assumed it was probably Celine's name since she had been too late to write it herself.

The session wasn't horrible- everyone went around and said their names, and the more comfortable members of the group talked a bit about what they had gone through. Most of it had been medical malpractice of some sort- one man in his early twenties had been told there was nothing wrong with him for *years* only to finally be taken seriously and find out he had a brain tumor that would likely kill him.

Asher really did try to pay attention, but as some of the stories became too descriptive he started to get nervous, and naturally his brain began to block everything out to protect him.

"Alright, and now I believe it's time to ask our newest member if he'd like to speak. Asher, dear, would you like to add in any of your own story?" Albert asked softly.

Asher felt his throat go dry, his hands shook as he clutched some of the extra fabric from his pants to steady them.

“I uh… I was a- a victim of some-... illegal human experimentations- a lot-... a lot happened during it-” His voice sounded so quiet and brittle, and he hated it. A few people nodded a bit in understanding after he finished talking, and Asher was greatly relieved when no one pressed him with intrusive questions as some of the people he lived with could occasionally do.

He knew they meant well, but it didn’t make him feel any better during their questioning.

“I see, and I’m sorry to hear it… Would you like to talk about exactly what happened, or should we save that for a later time?” Albert’s tone was gentle.

“... Maybe- maybe later-” Asher murmured, and Albert nodded a bit, moving on to the next person.

“Alright, Celine- would you like to speak this time?” The man turned to Celine next.

Asher glanced at her, and saw her just shake her head a little, her lips pressed together into a thin line. And just like that Albert moved on again. This was nice, actually. Lance was right- listening to other people’s stories made him feel a little less shitty about his own somehow.

When the session was over, everyone took their time getting up and saying their goodbyes to people they knew and seemed friendly with, and with Albert. Asher was pretty sure he was at least meant to say goodbye to Albert- it seemed like the polite thing to do anyways, so he shuffled over to Albert once someone else had just walked away from him.

“Um- good- goodbye-” He mumbled a bit awkwardly. Albert smiled softly down at him.

“Bye, dear. Should I expect to see you next week?” Albert asked, his tone quiet.

“Yeah I-... I think so- thank you-” Asher smiled a bit.

“Wonderful- I look forward to it, and I truly hope our group can help you-” Albert hummed his reply as Asher waved a little and walked

off.

He sighed as soon as he had slipped out into the hallway and shut the door. Everyone was spaced out enough in leaving that he was alone in the hallway again as he began walking out, pulling out his phone to check his messages.

"I'll be waiting in the back of the parking lot, no good spots" Lance had texted about five minutes ago.

"Ok" He sent back, then slipped his phone into his pocket. He stiffened as he heard footsteps behind him, turning his head to the side as he mentally prepared to either run or defend himself somehow.

But it was just Celine, jogging to catch up with him.

"Hey, wait up-" She smiled a bit once she caught up, and he slowed down a bit as he headed for the door to leave.

"... Hello- did you need something?" He asked quietly. She waited until they were outside of the building and away from the door to stop walking and begin speaking- Asher stopped as well to hear what she had to say.

"Yup- I wanna know why you lied about your name." She responded, crossing her arms. Her tone was slightly accusing, but not in a rude way, she just sounded curious and maybe a little smug.

"... Right- it's uh- sorta a long story-" He mumbled his reply, looking at the ground. Calypso shifted a little, making their discontent clear- luckily Celine didn't seem to notice it.

"Does it maybe have somethin' to do with you killin' that doctor?" She whispered, suddenly leaning in really close to Asher. He froze, staring at her with wide eyes as he felt himself go pale. She grinned, giving him a little nudge on the shoulder.

"Hey man, relax! I ain't a narc- he must've had it comin' if you felt the need to do it. Anyways- gimme your number, you seem pretty sick to actually *do* somethin' like that- I mean I *talk* about it, but I've never actually *done* anything, ya know?" She was still talking quietly, but not as quietly as Asher would've liked as she gestured for him to give her his phone.

He hesitated a moment- she could be lying, but for some reason he just didn't get that feeling from her. He somewhat reluctantly

unlocked and passed over his phone, which she quickly typed a phone number into before passing it back to him.

“I don’t- understand-” Asher murmured.

“What’s to understand? I think the government is stupid and most authority figures deserve to burn- but like not really, just most of ‘em. Anyway my ride’s waiting- see ya next week-” And with that she ran off, leaving Asher just standing there, bewildered.

Calypso chittered a little, snapping him back to reality and sending him off quickly to the back of the parking lot where Lance was waiting.

The drive home was nice, Lance and Asher talked a bit about the session and how Asher was planning on going back next week.

When they got back, Lance said something about hanging out with Dexter, which left a sour taste in Asher’s mouth but he didn’t say anything about it. So Lance left without ever coming inside, and Asher headed in alone.

Walking through the lobby, he paused as he got a weird feeling- like he wasn’t fully alone. Looking around a little, he quickened his pace to the elevator- but he was stopped by a firm hand landing on his shoulder.

He jumped with surprise and jerked away, spinning around to see Theodore standing there, glaring at him.

“Hello there, Asher.” Theodore’s tone was bitter, cold, and nothing like the usual fake sweet tone that he tended to use with Asher.

“What do you want?” Asher demanded, forcing his tone to stay steady and firm.

“Oh, just to talk to you. I think it’s about time we set a few things straight, hm?” Theodore took a step closer to Asher, who took an even bigger step back.

“You need to leave my friends alone, stop fucking brainwashing them.” Asher snapped.

“Oh Asher, I’m not *brainwashing* them! And here I thought you were smarter than that- more creative.” Theodore sighed, tutting in disappointment.

“Then what the hell *are* you doing to them??”

“Hm, wouldn’t you like to know?” Theodore grinned, and Asher’s wings puffed up in annoyance.

“Yes, I would. Because if you don’t tell me, you might be next up on my fucking hit list.” Asher hissed.

“Oh really? Threatening little ol’ me? I don’t think Chardy would be too happy to hear about that~” Theodore hummed in a sing-song tone, leaning sideways against one of the support pillars. Asher *really* hated him.

“Leave Chardy out of this.” Asher’s voice shook slightly, and he seriously wished he had a weapon on him. He vaguely noticed Calypso trying to wriggle out of Vesper’s hoodie, but he ignored him for now.

“He’s a dear friend of mine, you know- like Samson, in a way.” Theodore spoke over Asher. “I bet Vesper would make a good friend too, huh?”

“You- fucking leave him alone!” Asher took a step towards Theodore, who just grinned. Then Theodore’s gaze shifted, landing on Asher’s shoulder. Asher froze as he realized Calypso had successfully gotten out and was now perched there, her hackles raised and her lips pulled into a snarl, revealing her tiny white teeth.

“Ohh, now what’s this~?” Theodore reached forward as if to grab Calypso, but Asher managed to stumble back just quick enough to avoid his hand.

Calypso hissed and sprung himself off of Asher’s shoulder, landing on Theodore’s still extended arm and biting down. He yelped in surprise and tried to fling her off, clearly not expecting that.

“Don’t touch my fucking dragon and that won’t happen!” Asher shouted, reaching out to catch Calypso as she fluttered her wings to stay in the air after being flung.

“You- hah! He’s just as fucking crazy as you are-” Theodore grinned, not even bothering to look over his arm to see if he was actually wounded. “You stupid boy. Keep this up, your delirious, reactive behavior is working *so* wonderfully for me, I hardly even have to alter anything with my powers. You’re doing all the work for me~” Theodore slipped past Asher as he headed for the elevator, shuffling

his dark bat wings against his back and smoothing out his hair.

Asher stayed put, glaring at Theodore right up until the elevator doors shut. What the hell was that supposed to mean?

That was clearly a threat, a threat directly against Vesper no less. He was sure it was more than likely at this point that Theodore had gotten more control of Vesper, and Asher couldn't do *anything* . He needed to kill that bastard before it was too late- maybe after their little trip out to the lab so it wouldn't directly jeopardize the mission. He could only hope that everyone would understand everything he needed to do once Theodore was gone.

Chapter End Notes

> For the panic attack bit just picture you're scrolling TikTok or another social media having a mild anxiety attack or just sad and crying, then you see a video thats so funny or startling that it just snaps you out of it so sudden it gives you whiplash lol

The Mission

Chapter Summary

> Cue the unreliable narrator tag :')
> Look at me, realizing that for my characters to have smart plans that make sense, I actually have to be the one to come up with those plans (I cried several times trying to figure this stuff out and it doesn't make sense IN THE STORY because the reader doesn't get every side of the story)
> Also guess what Asher, being in fight or flight 24/7 can make you REALLY tired

Asher went back to his room after that, but he took the stairs to avoid Theodore so it took him forever. Vesper had asked him what was wrong, but something just seemed not quite right about the way he asked, so Asher insisted he was fine, and just a little upset from the therapy session.

Vesper didn't seem to believe it, but he stopped pressing for answers at least. Calypso was particularly clingy after that though- Asher had to bring her everywhere that he went, which he'd rather not do when it came to mealtimes.

For now he just needed to bide his time, act normal and quit causing issues. But every time he talked now he just felt that everyone was *annoyed* - even if he was just asking someone to pass him the salt, he could feel the annoyance in the gaze and movements of those around him.

Of course he had felt this way before, but usually he was being a little delusional and people weren't *actually* annoyed with him, he just thought they were- but he knew that this time wasn't like that.

He also knew it was because of Theodore, who was currently talking with Chardy. Asher had done his best to tune them out, but at some point Asher heard something that made him actually listen in.

"–and then I told her that she was crazy! Delusional, even–" It was just a snippet of a story Theodore was apparently telling, but Asher stiffened when he heard it. Maybe he was just imagining it, but he could've *sworn* Theodore looked at him when he used the exact words

he had just called Asher earlier that day.

He just glared down at the table, determined not to cause any issues. He needed to stop giving people reasons to agree with Theodore over him until he could get rid of Theodore.

Finally once dinner was over, Daniel said something about sending the group off to do the scouting mission. Francis, Amelia, and Victor ended up being the three who had decided to go. Asher wanted to keep his goodbyes to them brief- the air still reeked of general annoyance and he didn't want to accidentally step on any toes. But in the back of his mind, a little voice asked if truly a simple "goodbye" was the last thing he wanted to say to them, in case one of them died.

Of course this mission wasn't supposed to be dangerous, he was sure they would all be perfectly safe, but that didn't do anything to soothe the thought in the back of his mind. Calypso chittered softly from where she was hidden in his pocket, urging him on as if they were reading his thoughts.

"Fuck, okay…" He whispered, his words quieter than even his breath. He sort of awkwardly shuffled over to Amelia, who was double-checking all of her weapons as she spoke to Lance.

"Good- good luck on the mission, Amelia- I know it's just to scout but-... be safe-" He forced a small smile as she glanced down at him, then to Lance with an odd look.

"... Thanks kid. I'll uh- see you later-" She muttered. Asher just nodded a little and moved to Francis and Victor, who were both talking to each other about the plan. It was odd to see the two of them together, they were such polar opposites and didn't seem to get along super well- but they seemed fine now at least.

"Bye guys, don't get killed-" It was weak, but it was better than just quietly waving them off.

"Right, yup- sure-" Victor muttered, and Francis just nodded a little. Asher sighed and went back off to his room, shortly followed by Vesper. He was still acting just a *little* off- just enough for Asher to be uneasy. The more time he spent around Vesper, the more Vesper could notice how odd he was acting- so when Asher got a text, he was quick to check it to avoid having to say anything as he sat down on the bed.

"Wsp" It was Celine- he hadn't checked before, but when she had his phone earlier she had sent herself a text just saying hi.

“Nt much, hru?” Asher quickly texted back, absently noticing Vesper sit down next to him.

“Wanna hang? im bored asf” She replied almost instantly. Asher hesitated a second, glancing at Vesper. It would honestly be nice to get out of the house for a bit- and to get his mind off of things.

“mybe, where at?” He sent.

She sent him a street name, and when he checked it on the map he saw that it was right near the park and well within walking distance.

“... Hey, Vesper?” He started, speaking in a soft tone.

“Yeah? What’s up?” He asked softly, and Asher’s chest tightened. He just wanted things to be *normal* - he wanted to leave with Vesper so he could just feel comfortable with Vesper. But he had nowhere he could go- nowhere to bring Vesper that would be safe for them, or at least not safe to get there given Vesper’s appearance.

“I uh- I met someone earlier at that group therapy thing and- she asked for my number so we could hang out, and I-... I really need to get my mind off of this mission- do you think you’ll be alright here for a few hours if I go hang out with her?” He asked quietly. He noticed Vesper tense a little from where he was sitting next to him- and that made Asher irrationally nervous.

“... Oh, sure. Where are you guys going?” Vesper asked, his voice tight.

“I- I think just to the park- thank you, Vesper- I’m gonna get going now I think- I feel like I’m gonna throw up if I have to think about Amelia, Francis or Victor right now-” He forced a small chuckle as he stood up, sending a quick text back to Celine.

“im on my way”

He quickly got ready and made sure Calypso was still comfortable where she was, and then he was out the door. He ignored everyone out in the living room as he headed to the elevator and pressed the button for the ground floor.

The walk to the street Celine had sent was uneventful, and when he got there he saw Celine standing under the street sign. Hanging out with her was nice- it was the escape that he needed. They sort of just ran around the park talking- which did eventually lead to a quick

conversation about Klaus and an even quicker explanation of why Asher wanted him dead.

Celine was *scarily* understanding and kept saying things like “Stick it to the man”, but it just made Asher feel better about the whole situation in the end.

Hours had passed of them hanging out before he felt his phone buzz in his pocket. He paused his conversation, pulling it out and checking his texts. He was a little surprised to see that over four hours had passed and he hadn’t gotten a text from Vesper like he usually did when he was gone for a whole. He had gotten a text from Daniel, however.

“Everyones back, we all need to meet and talk about what they saw.” It was very vague, and that made Asher nervous. He just sent a simple thumbs up text, and then told Celine he had to go. She was understanding luckily, and so with that Asher started quickly walking back home.

When he stepped out of the elevator up onto the main floor, everyone was sprawled around the various seats in the living room and seemingly waiting for him. Amelia, Francis and Victor were all standing, but everyone else was taking up pretty much every other seat- so Asher just sort of awkwardly shuffled in and sat on the floor between some of the couches.

He glanced at Vesper, who looked back at him but didn’t otherwise move or do anything. He sighed quietly and turned his attention to Francis, who had just begun speaking.

“As you know, we all went on the scouting mission to ensure that our plan would work. But when we were there, a few things became far too apparent for us to not risk going in and checking things out for ourselves. Through that, we have discovered that in a matter of days they are going to have and be actively experimenting on several ‘subjects’.” Francis began explaining, and you could hear a pin drop from how quiet it was in the room.

“And so because of that, we are going to have to rapidly accelerate our timeline. Instead of going in a few days, Chardy, Theodore, and Asher are all going to go tomorrow night. Then the next group being Chardy and Samson will go the following, and on the third night Francis and Samson will go.” Daniel picked up from there. They had decided that one person from the night before would go on the next mission, because who better to know what was different and what was

the same than someone who had seen it with their own eyes?

“I’m still not a big fan of *Asher* going. He and Vesper should probably be kept as far from this as possible-” Amelia spoke, and Victor rather loudly voiced his agreement.

“Because I have a right to volunteer for these missions, just like everyone else does. I want to go. And taking pictures of a place and some papers isn't going to be *anything* like what I went through before.” Asher replied, using just a bit of his ability in his voice.

“Besides, it’s already been decided and planned for. We can’t risk changing anything now. So Francis, please finish explaining everything that you saw, then I want everyone to get to bed and prepare for tomorrow.” Daniel added in a firm tone.

Francis nodded, then carried on speaking. Essentially the blueprints were correct, and everything else stayed pretty much the same with the plans. The conversation felt much longer than it should be, and it was making Asher increasingly uncomfortable- though that might’ve just been from the stares he kept getting from Samson and Theodore.

When it was finally over, Asher went to his room with Vesper for a very restless night of sleep.

The next day went by in a blurr, and before he knew it he was climbing out of the back of Lance’s car a few blocks away from the lab. It was right near the heart of the city, well disguised between hospitals and businesses.

The three of them walked the rest of the way there, the air was fucking freezing as little flurries of snow drifted to join the gray sludge on the ground that had amounted over the last week or so.

Asher had an eerily similar feeling to the morning he had given himself over to Burton- how beautiful the sunrise was, what a nice day it had been. Now, just like then, he was momentarily caught up in the beauty of this tiny part of the world around him as he walked to what felt like an execution.

He should feel more positive about this- he wasn’t panicking at least, but this wouldn’t be the most dangerous thing he’d ever done. They would be fine- it was dangerous, but they had a plan, and guns.

Asher had used a gun before, but never on a real person- he hoped that wouldn't have to change tonight, but he was prepared for whatever could happen.

The lab was a very wide building, but one of the shorter ones in the area with only eight stories- well, nine if you included the secret basement.

Once they got to the back door, Chardy quickly got to picking the lock while Asher stood guard to make sure no one saw them. The cameras had already been deactivated temporarily, but all of them were wearing some sort of masks anyway. Asher wore the same bandana he had when he killed Klaus, but he wasn't wearing the hood this time because he wanted to keep his entire line of vision open.

Once Chardy got the door open, they all stepped into a long and incredibly dark hallway. Theodore pulled out a flashlight and shined it down the hall- it seemed to be empty other than a single door at the end.

"Looks clear… Weird, Daniel said the place would be decked out in security-" Chardy whispered before stepping forward and motioning for the other two to follow him. But something wasn't right- and right as Chardy took a step, Asher saw a glint of light against something close to the floor. He grabbed Chardy by the shoulder and yanked him back.

"Wait!" Asher whisper-yelled. Chardy whipped around and looked at Asher with wide eyes, but before he could speak Asher pulled the blacklight he'd luckily thought to bring with him out of his bag. Shining it down the hall, dozens of shiny white lines only a few inches above the floor reflected the light off of them. Some sort of lasers, probably connected to a silent alarm, and Asher had stopped Chardy from walking right through one.

"Be careful-" Theodore whispered, and Asher instantly felt annoyed.

"I think I see a path, we can go through them-" Asher mumbled, moving to take the lead.

Using the blacklight, they all three managed to make their way through the hallway without tripping any of the alarms. The next door was unlocked and opened up into the actual lab part- there were quite a few desks and computers around this room.

"Asher, why don't you start downloading data from this room while

me and Theodore go farther in?" Chardy suggested, keeping his voice low. It was dark- hard to see, but their flashlights provided enough light to get by.

"After that I'm actually sort of thinking that I should go ahead, and maybe Theodore can stay here to collect data from the computers-" Asher responded. He hoped that Theodore's power worked more logic-based like Asher's did, where people could still work around his power if he was saying something illogical- so that if Theodore was making them *feel* a certain way, it wouldn't work if that specific feeling didn't make sense for the situation.

"... Okay, that works-" Chardy nodded a bit to himself, glancing at Theodore who just nodded back and turned to one of the computers to get to work.

Chardy and Asher headed over to one of the other doors in the room, pushing it open to reveal yet another hallway with several other doors.

It only took them a few minutes to clear all the rooms- they were experimentation rooms, very similar to the one Vesper had been in with a viewing window and everything. They took pictures of all the rooms, and the control panels on the desks in front of the windows.

Once they finished with that room, Theodore was finished getting what he could from the computers and they all three together moved to the next room.

This one was a smaller office with only one desk, but they managed to find documents from exactly *where* they were going to be sourcing their next group of test subjects. Chardy and Theodore left Asher alone to take pictures here- the two of them heading off.

He mostly just took pictures- he didn't have time to read over it right now, they all just needed to get the information safely back to Daniel. But just as Asher was putting one of the papers with a list of names on it away, he felt himself go pale as he saw one particular name on the list.

Dexter .

The list was too long for it to be all of their next subjects- and with that, a horrible thought hit Asher.

Dexter could be selling out Lance to these people- they could kidnap

Lance next time he hung out with Dexter. A knot of anxiety formed in Asher's stomach thinking of his brother locked up in one of these rooms, tortured. Exploited for his power.

He scrambled to finish putting everything away and finish what he needed to do so he could find the others, when suddenly he heard a gunshot from outside the room. It was far enough away to not hurt his ears, but loud enough for both he and Calypso to physically jump and Calypso to make a small startled noise.

“Shitshitshit-” He whispered as he shakily pulled out his own gun, sneaking to the door and peering out of it. He couldn’t see anything from his angle- whatever had happened was around the corner from him.

But he could hear better now- he could hear Chardy mumbling curses in a muffled voice.

“ *Shit* .” Without a thought he took off, running down the hall and rounding the corner just as another shot was fired- much louder now. It left a ringing in his ears as he whipped his head around, frantically looking for his friend as the disorientation set in.

The sight before him was jarring, to say the least.

Chardy was leaned back against the wall, clearly in pain- he couldn’t tell where it was coming from, but there was blood *everywhere* . On the floor, covering Chardy and soaking into his clothes- Asher realized with horror that he was *standing* in a pool of blood.

His throat felt like it was closing as he began trembling, visions of what happened to his mom flashing before him. He couldn’t think of that right now- he forced his breathing to stay even as he scanned over the rest of the hallway.

Theodore was standing a few feet away from Chardy in the middle of the hallway, holding his gun as he stood over a very dead man lying on the ground. The man looked like a security guard, and was definitely the source of at least some of the blood.

“What the *fuck* happened??” Asher demanded, his voice shaky. Theodore seemed very serious as he turned around to check on Chardy- he wasn’t playing games now.

“The guy snuck up on us, he shot Chardy.” Theodore hissed as he knelt next to Chardy, who was borderline passing out. Asher’s mind

raced as he kicked into survival gear, not allowing himself to panic or flip out for the moment.

“Can you get him out of here?” Asher asked Theodore, his tone very firm as he knelt down to help him. Chardy had been shot in his right leg, just above the knee- it was bleeding badly but Theodore was already wrapping bandages around it to stop it.

Why did he have bandages? A little voice asked, but right now he couldn’t afford to amuse that suspicion.

“Why, don’t want to help?” Theodore snapped.

“I’m going to stay here to clean this shit up so we can still come back tomorrow. We aren’t fucking done here.” Asher shot back. Chardy made a sound like he was trying to talk, probably trying to argue- but the poor guy was on the verge of passing out.

Without a word, Theodore and Asher finished wrapping him up, and Theodore began walking as quickly as possible while supporting Chardy’s weight.

“Wait- take this.” Asher followed them and passed over his blacklight. He wasn’t sure how he was going to get out without it, but that was a problem for later.

As Theodore took it, Chardy reached out and weakly grabbed onto Asher’s hand. Asher knew in that moment that Chardy was using his power- trying to grasp some idea of what was going to happen. The contact only lasted a second before Theodore began walking again, bringing Chardy with him.

Asher had no idea what Chardy had just seen.

He turned back, going to a different room he had tried to open before only to find that it had just been a janitor's supply closet.

He was grateful for it now, as he grabbed as many cleaning products as he could and a mop. He got to work cleaning, scrubbing away all remains of their visit here as best he could with the light from his flashlight. He had to be careful- if there was one guard, there would certainly be more- and after hearing two gunshots surely they would be on the way. But no one else came- it was eerie as fuck. After he’d gotten the body wrapped up in several trash bags and everything else cleaned up, he had been in this place for entirely too long. But he needed to do something with this guy- he couldn’t just leave the body

here.

Surely a place like this would have a way to get rid of “organic materials” like this- so purely on a hunch, he made his way down to the basement. There, he found what he was looking for- a massive furnace built purely for disposing of things like this.

It took him damn near an hour getting the body down there, and by the time he was done all of the adrenaline and whatever divine intervention had been keeping him running was wearing off. He was trembling, and so tired he could hardly keep himself standing as he stumbled back up the stairs and out of the basement, taking a few pictures along the way.

Making his way back to the hallway they had initially come in from, Asher felt like he wanted to throw up. It was nearly two in the morning, and he wanted to go *home* .

And now he’d have to get through a hallway with no help from his blacklight. But he’d initially seen the glint of light with a regular flashlight- maybe he could make it that way. Between hints of where the lasers were from his light, and trying to take a similar path that he had used earlier, he managed to make it through the hallway with nothing happening.

Pushing himself out into the alley, he slumped against the wall and looked around, letting out a shaky breath. It was only then that he realized the “home” he was wanting to go to wasn’t Daniel’s building. He wasn’t sure where he wanted to go, all he knew was that it *wasn’t fucking here* .

But he didn’t have a choice right now- he needed to go check on Chardy. He needed to get back- so with help from the map on his phone, he began walking. It was a much longer walk than it was to drive, but he made it- covered in blood and the smell of bleach, he stumbled out of the elevator and into the living room.

Right away Vesper was there, hugging him tightly as Asher sunk into the warmth of the embrace. He was vaguely aware of Daniel asking him something, but he was suddenly hit with a wave of exhaustion and anxiety so intense that the only reason he was even staying standing was because of Vesper.

He was sure Vesper was talking, because he could feel the rumbling in Vesper's chest, but he couldn’t focus enough to hear the words. He was thinking of something else at the moment- how the room felt. He

still got that *weird* feeling he always got after Theodore talked to someone, but he wasn't getting it from Vesper.

Just an overwhelming feeling of anxiety- maybe strong emotions were enough to cut through Theodore's power. Every power had a weakness, after all- and if Asher could find Theodore's weakness then he wouldn't have to kill Theodore to get rid of him.

It felt like all he did was blink, but when he opened his eyes again he was back in his room, in bed and staring up at the ceiling. Vesper was doing something a few feet away, Asher could hear him moving- but he couldn't lift his head all the way to look at him.

Calypso chittered softly from the other side of him, seemingly just as tired as Asher was as she curled up on the pillow beside his head. A moment later Vesper was back at his side, standing over him.

"Stardust, do you think you can sit up so I can help you change…?" Vesper asked softly. Asher sighed, he *really* didn't want to get up. He didn't know why the hell he was so tired- sure it was late, and he'd done a lot, but not *that* much.

"Okay…" He mumbled, and with Vesper's help he managed to sit up.

He changed into clean clothes, and then Vesper *finally* laid down next to him and hugged him tightly, wrapping several tentacles around Asher.

"Now get some rest, Daniel wants to talk to you in the morning…" Vesper whispered as he ran a hand through Asher's hair. Asher could usually tune in to how Vesper was feeling due to him almost always blocking Vesper's power out, but now that his energy was draining he was feeling a smaller version of whatever Vesper was feeling. At the moment, it was still anxiety but mingled with a deep feeling of *protectiveness* .

It was a soothing feeling to fall asleep to, listening to Vesper's heartbeat against the side of his head.

The next morning Asher was practically interrogated by Daniel- what he did, what happened, why he stayed so late. Asher tried to just answer all of the questions without complaint, but he was starting to get annoyed when he was asked to rephrase his answer to the same question over and over.

“Daniel- this is all great and everything, but I don’t have any other answers for you. I stayed to clean everything up, I put the security guard's body in a furnace in the basement, and I walked back here- now can you *please* tell me how Chardy is doing??” Asher suddenly snapped, cutting off Daniel mid-sentence.

Vesper had refused to leave Asher’s side, so he was sitting on the couch upstairs in Daniel's room right next to Asher with an arm wrapped around him. As far as Asher was aware, no one else had tried to talk to him- which oddly felt like a bit of a gut-punch, but he should be relieved.

“... Chardy is fine, but we brought him to a real hospital. He requested to not have visitors for the time being- but I promise you he’s okay, and he’s going to make a full recovery. He might need a bit of physical therapy once his leg is good to walk on again though-” Daniel replied, his tone softening.

“... Good. And- who’s taking his place tonight?” Asher asked, but there was a long moment of silence. “Oh my god, you can’t cancel the mission Daniel-”

“I don’t see much of another option, Asher. Clearly it’s too dangerous after what happened last night-” Daniel responded.

“We *need* to get that information- Dan, I- There’s too much at stake. Let me take Chardy’s place- I’ll go with Samson, maybe we can get enough information tonight that no one will need to go tomorrow-” Asher’s tone was nearly pleading.

He didn’t remember the list at the moment- didn’t remember seeing Dexter’s name, but he just *knew* they couldn’t do this without the other missing pieces of the puzzle.

“No.” Vesper’s firm voice startled him from his thoughts.

“Vesper, we need to–” He began, but Vesper spoke over him.

“You could’ve been just as badly hurt as Chardy, or *killed* . You can’t go back there.”

“I don’t have much of a *choice* , Vesper- I’ll- I’ll be fine, I won’t be going alone-” Asher mumbled.

“Right, because *Samson* being there is going to be so much safer than going alone.” Vesper grumbled.

"... Okay, look. Asher is right- we're going to need as much information as we can get. But Vesper I agree, it is dangerous- lucky for us I've got connections in the right places. I'll get you and Samson sets of bullet proof vests and something similar to go round your legs, and maybe lower arms to be safe. I'll send you in with the same weapons, and this time you guys need to be more stealthy. Don't treat it like you're walking around alone in there- act like you've already been seen-" Daniel spoke, and Asher noticed Vesper stiffen.

"You can't be serious." Vesper spoke in a slightly exasperated way. Vesper had never outright challenged something Daniel had said like that, even if it was just with Asher behind closed doors.

"I'm sorry Vesper, but I am. This is something we need to do, and I think we both know that we wouldn't be able to stop Asher from doing it if we tried." Daniel replied, and Asher couldn't help but feel a bit offended at that, but he didn't say anything.

Vesper was clearly unhappy with the decision, and he kept sticking incredibly close to Asher for the rest of the day until it was time for him and Samson to leave.

Once again Lance drove them to that spot a few blocks away, and then they walked the rest of the way to get there. Samson was humming the whole way and overall acting way too happy about this.

"Can you be quiet?" Asher snapped as they neared the building.

"Why? Can't I do something to distract myself?" Samson mock pouted.

"We can't let anyone know we're here." Asher muttered as he knelt down to pick the lock on the door, just as Chardy had the night before.

Samson was quiet as they went past all the rooms they had already cleared, and then headed upstairs to find more rooms, and with them, more information.

At some point Asher was focused on a computer as he clicked on which files to download on the hard-drive. Samson had been across the room doing the same thing a moment ago, but suddenly Asher felt a presence behind him.

Reaching for his gun, he spun the chair around and found himself face to face with Samson, who was watching him with a creepy grin from barely a foot away.

“Jesus! Can you just- stop??” Asher snapped.

“Stop what?” Samson hummed.

“Hovering. I know you’re pissed about me asking about Theodore, but this isn’t the fucking time for that.” Asher replied.

“Oh Asher, I thought you would’ve learned by now…” Samson sighed, turning away from Asher to get back to whatever he was doing.

He shouldn’t humor this- he shouldn’t bother dealing with Samson and his fucking *riddles* - it was really starting to piss him off.

“Learned *what* , Samson? I don’t- you aren’t helping, and I don’t understand what you *or* Theodore are saying.”

“You aren’t supposed to, silly~! Now get back to work, we’ve got so much to do and so little time.” Samson replied in that annoying sing-song tone.

Asher rolled his eyes and just got back to what he was doing. While he was doing his searching, he found a few names that seemed familiar. They were on his own personal list of people he needed to look into for being involved in things like this. He memorized the names, then moved on.

They got through the rest of the night in silence, and luckily didn’t end up running into anyone else as they made their way out. Vesper was beyond relieved when Asher made it back unharmed, but Asher just couldn’t say he felt that same sense of relief.

He couldn’t relax, he was constantly plagued by the feeling of things just being *wrong* .

He didn’t know how to get over that feeling, but he knew something that he could do to help this cause. Things were still rapidly accelerating with the people working at the lab- apparently some eyes on the inside had told Daniel that the scientists were planning on beginning work in a few days.

Perhaps there was a way Asher could help postpone that, and release some of his own pent up emotions in one go. And he knew exactly

how.

Down the drain

Chapter Summary

> Okay I was TRYING to space out the chapters by a few days at a time but then I was hanging out with some irl friends who read it, and I got way too excited for the plot since we're hitting the big climax soon, so I just spammed out all the chapters I've been stockpiling. Probably won't post again until after Monday. Anyways a lot happens, its a whirlwind

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next day Asher had safely returned from the mission, he convinced Vesper that he was doing fine for long enough to go talk to Amelia alone.

He knocked on her door, and a moment later she answered it with a slightly confused expression.

“Yeah, what’s up?” She asked, looking Asher up and down with mild skepticism.

“Hey, Amelia. I need your help with something, but I need you to not ask any questions, okay?” He replied.

“... I dunno if I can help if I can’t ask *any* questions- what’s going on?” Her tone was slightly suspicious, still laced with that annoyance caused by Theodore’s control.

“Okay okay it’s- can I come in?” He asked, glancing down both hallways to see if anyone else was listening- luckily he didn’t see anyone. Amelia hesitated a moment before sighing and stepping out of the way so that Asher could step into the room, then she shut the door behind him.

“Okay, now what’s up?”

“I uh- need access to a poison- one that I can get access to like- right now. And one that’s deadly enough that I don’t need to stick around and make sure that it works-” He mumbled, looking at the ground.

The silence that followed truly did speak volumes, until Amelia finally spoke to fill it.

“Who- Asher what are you going to do??” She kept her voice low, but she clearly sounded concerned and a little skeptical.

“Look it’s- Daniel said they’re trying to push up the experimentations on people and start sooner, but surely they would have to push it back if one of their main scientists died, yeah? And I just so happen to have a list of people I was *already* looking into for shit like this, now with the list I saw there last night I have all the proof I need- just one person could potentially save so many future victims-” Asher explained quietly.

“... Oh man, I don’t know kid- it- it makes sense, but I don’t-... killing people isn’t our first go-to here, and especially not you- I mean Lance would lose his shit if he knew I was teaching you about poisons at all-...” Amelia spoke hesitantly.

“I just need you to happen to tell me about a super specific kind of poison- nothing else.” Asher said firmly. Amelia hesitated a bit, but Asher saw something snap behind her pretty green eyes.

“Fine. But I need to go with you- Lance will kill me if he finds out anyway, so I might as well make sure you stay safe. When do you want to do this, and how?” She asked, and Asher sighed.

Quite frankly he’d rather not bring her with, but he supposed it would probably be a safer option, and arguing with her would be pointless anyway.

“Okay- I uh, don’t honestly know. I know which target I’m going for and where his house is, but I don’t want to leave signs of a struggle- I can’t exactly go in there and offer to feed him something though. But this needs to be done quickly- tonight, preferably.” He replied, and Amelia paused for a moment.

“We could inject him once he’s asleep- does he live alone?” She inquired.

“Yeah, ugly bastard is all alone. Do you have something in mind?”

“Water Hemlock- if I can go find some we can mix it in with water and let that sit for a while. If we can inject enough of the diluted mixture to his bloodstream he’ll be dead in minutes-” She responded, and Asher nodded a bit.

“That sounds perfect, actually- do you know where to get some?” He definitely sounded far too eager.

“I do- but it’s gonna take me a few hours. We probably can’t do this until much later tonight anyways though right?” She answered.

“Yeah- so- can you get it, and make sure *no one* finds out? I’ll come up with an excuse for where we’re going-” He asked.

“Yeah, yeah that sounds good. I better hit the road soon in case traffic is bad- I’ll see you later-” She smiled a bit, also sounding slightly too eager. Asher nodded and left the room, heading back to his own room.

He sort of just hung out with Vesper for the next few hours, but as Amelia sent a message saying she was on her way back Asher knew he needed to actually figure out what to say to Vesper and Lance.

He finally decided on just saying they found a nice restaurant with mostly sandwiches since Lance didn’t particularly like them and probably wouldn’t ask to come along, and Vesper was still unable to go anywhere in public for the time being.

So when the time seemed right, he turned to where Vesper was curled up in bed playing block blast- it was one of the ones Asher had downloaded for him months ago, but Vesper had only just started playing it recently and seemed to enjoy it. Asher was lying nearby, but sort of had been doing his own thing.

“Hey, dove-” He began, and Vesper put down the phone, smiling a bit back at Asher.

“Yes?”

“Me and Amelia have been texting back and forth, and I think we’re gonna go to this cute little sandwich shop-” Asher replied, shifting so he was fully facing Vesper and laying on his side.

Vesper narrowed his eyes a bit, giving Asher a sort of inspecting look. He knew he couldn’t lie to Vesper- not under usual situations, but with the mental attacks from Theodore he just wasn’t sure how Vesper’s ability to apparently read Asher’s fucking mind might be affected.

“Asher-” Vesper started, shifting so that he was now also fully facing Asher, but he was half sitting propped up on his elbow now.

“Hm?” Asher hummed innocently, looking up at Vesper.

“You know you can’t lie to me-” Vesper spoke quietly, reaching out a hand to cup Asher’s face. “So, where are you really going?” Vesper asked in a firm tone, and Asher leaned into his hand a little as Vesper began lightly caressing his cheek with his thumb.

“I don’t think you’d approve of it…” He mumbled as a few of Vesper’s tentacles curled around him.

“Well, I’d like to know regardless.” Vesper replied.

“Okay, it-... me and Amelia are going to uh- kill someone- one of the scientists who’s supposed to help start up that lab. We figured it would set things back a few days, but-... I don’t want Lance to know. I don’t want *anyone* to know, not yet-” Asher replied, his voice lowering to a whisper.

“... Okay, I won’t mention it. But can you please stop trying to lie?” Vesper’s tone shifted to a much softer, gentler and almost pleading tone.

Asher instantly felt bad, as he closed the distance between them and hugged Vesper, snuggling against him.

“Yeah-... sorry…” He murmured as Vesper hid his face in Asher’s hair.

“It’s okay…” Vesper muttered with a soft sigh, sending a shiver up Asher’s spine as his hair was ruffled by Vesper’s warm breath.

When Amelia got home, she and Asher made an actual solid plan and then told Lance they were going to have dinner at that sandwich shop instead of with everyone else at home. So when dinner was done there, they both left and headed down to her car.

“He won’t be asleep yet, it’s too early-” Asher mumbled as he slid into the passenger seat.

“Yeah, I know- maybe we should actually go get something to eat?” She suggested. Asher honestly didn’t really feel like eating- he certainly didn’t deserve to after all of this, but it usually wasn’t a choice for him to eat or not.

“We can go somewhere if you want, but I’m not super hungry so I

probably won't get anything-" He replied, forcing a small smile, and ignoring the discomfort of hunger just beginning to gnaw at him.

"Oh- okay, are you sure?" She asked, a touch of concern in her tone. Asher wasn't sure how much everyone else knew, but she must not have forgotten about how concerned Lance and Daniel were about him eating all those months ago.

"Mhm, I always get a little queasy before something like this-" He replied with a sigh. She nodded a bit and started driving.

"We don't have to go through with it, you know…" She spoke softly.

"I know, I want to. It feels like the right thing to do-" Asher responded.

"Yeah, you're right…" She fell quiet after that.

They did end up going to a little food truck where she got some sort of sandwich, and they sat outside watching the sky fully darken into a deep, all-consuming blackness. There were no stars- there never were, here in the city.

Asher thought back to that night in the woods with Vesper, and he wished so desperately that he could be back there with Vesper, under a star-filled sky and cradled in a bed of grass.

When Amelia was done eating, they just hung out on their phones for a while longer until it was around nine at night. In truth, Asher would've preferred to wait longer- but they had left home right around six and three hours were already pushing it for how long it would take them to just have dinner, so they had already been making excuses to tell Lance.

Plus they couldn't go home now, it would probably be after ten when they got home.

So they got back into Amelia's car and began heading out to that guy's house towards the outskirts of the city. Asher had been careful to only look at the ones who lived in houses for this specifically, he didn't want to have to deal with cameras or neighbors that could hear something as quiet as talking volume through the walls of some cheap shitty apartment.

When they got near the house, Amelia parked her car on an empty street corner and they got out to walk the rest of the way. It was just

before nine-thirty now- so all Asher could hope was that this guy was an early sleeper.

He snuck around the side of the house with Amelia following quickly behind him. All the lights were off, which was a good sign- so he began trying to open any windows and doors to the first floor.

Of course they were all locked, and neither of them had anything to use to pick the kinds of locks that they had.

“Okay, I’m gonna fly up to the windows on the second story- if I can get in, I’ll open the back door for you-” Asher spoke quietly, and Amelia nodded.

“Alright, sounds good- be careful-” She whispered back.

Asher flapped his wings a few times, finding it particularly strenuous right now after not eating, but he got himself up into the air.

He flew as close as he could to the house without hitting his wings on the sides of it- it was an awkward angle but he was able to test a few of the windows this way.
Most of them were locked, of course- but he found one to a hallway that actually opened. Grinning, he opened the window as much as he could and flung himself inside, tucking his wings in close to himself.

He intentionally rolled rather than just falling onto the ground to make as little noise as possible, but the floor still creaked from his sudden weight being added to it.

He froze, staying completely still as he looked around and waited for any sounds, any signs that he had been heard- but nothing came.

He counted in his head to thirty before getting up, brushing himself off and going to shut the window he had used to get in, pulling his sleeve over his hand to avoid leaving fingerprints.

Then he headed downstairs, careful to test his weight on each step before fully putting his weight down in case any of them would creak like the floor did. It was time-consuming, but he was glad he did it because a few of the steps definitely would have creaked rather loudly had he not been as careful as he was.

After making his way to the back door, he carefully unlocked it and pushed it open. Amelia was waiting right outside and silently stepped into the house. Asher shut the door and led her to the stairs.

He put his finger up to his lips and made a “shh” motion to signal to be quiet, then he pointed at the stairs. Amelia nodded and was careful to follow Asher’s every step up the stairs and across the hallway.

Asher began looking into each door, trying to find the bedroom. Of course it was the very last door he checked, at the end of the hall.

He watched as Amelia pulled off her backpack, shuffling around in it for a moment before pulling out a bag filled with something wrapped up in bubble wrap. She opened the bag and unwrapped a scary big looking needle filled with a mostly clear, brownish liquid.

He pushed the door open the rest of the way, waiting for his eyes to fully adjust to the lighting. It was dark in the whole house, but the windows let in enough light to see easily- the bedroom was much darker though.

Once he was able to make out the sleeping form in the bed, he gestured for Amelia to hand over the needle. She hesitated a moment, but reluctantly passed it over.

He nodded his thanks to her and then slipped over to the bed, trying to figure out the best way to do this.

The neck would be an easy go to, but it would hurt- might even wake him up. Being stabbed with a needle *anywhere* might wake him though- but regardless Asher decided to play it safe and go for a limb instead. Besides, most older people took sleeping medications so maybe he would be in a deep enough sleep to not wake up if it didn’t hurt too bad.

He felt around the blanket until he found the edge of it and began slowly lifting it, watching the guy’s face for any signs of change, but he stayed asleep.

He was just wearing boxers so Asher had a clear shot to his lower leg. He tapped the spot he was going to stab with increasing aggression a few times, then stuck in the needle.

He squeezed it out as fast as he could, then yanked it out and practically tossed himself down to the floor, out of the man's line of sign.

Taking his signal, Amelia quietly shut the door all the way, casting Asher in complete darkness.

He heard a shuffling up from the bed, so he stayed put, clutching the needle still. It was hard to tell in the lighting, but it looked like he did manage to inject all of it- he just hoped it would be potent enough.

When the sounds of movement stopped, he once again counted in his head to thirty before quietly, slowly getting up. He kept his eyes on the man for any signs of movement- he was still breathing but was otherwise still.

With that reassurance, Asher quietly headed for the door and slipped out of the room, shutting the door behind himself.

“Alright, let’s get the fuck out of here.” Asher whispered, heading back downstairs. Amelia nodded and followed him- maybe it was the dim light, but she looked a little pale. And come to think of it, Asher was shaking a little.

They snuck out of the back door and around the house, back down to the street where they leisurely walked back to the car so they wouldn’t look too suspicious.

Once back in the car, Amelia was quiet as she began driving them home.

“Lance texted-...” She mumbled eventually.

“... What did he say?” Asher asked, a knot of anxiety forming in his stomach- or maybe that was hunger.

“Uh- he just asked when we would be home, but his text was just- worded a little funny. He might be onto us- good thing I’ve got some leftovers from that sandwich so it’ll seem legit-” She chuckled a little.

“Pft- yeah-...” Asher hesitated a moment. “Thanks for this- I- I think it’ll help our cause, and it feels good to be doing something that feels useful again-” He mumbled.

“Oh, for sure… trust me, I’m right with you there- I haven’t been on a real mission in what feels like ages, and I- I mean I like my life here, but it gets old eventually- ya know?” She replied with a small smile.

“Yeah, I know…” He trailed off, looking out the window at the passing buildings and occasional people out walking.

When they got home, they headed inside and to the elevator- Asher was half worried that Theodore would jump out and corner them again like he did last time Asher walked through here alone.

But he didn't, and they made it upstairs okay. Now getting back to their rooms was another story- Lance was waiting with Daniel in the living room, and everyone else was nowhere to be seen- even Vesper.

"Oh, welcome back." Lance muttered, but Asher could hear the suspicious dripping from his voice.

"Thank you, dear brother of mine- I'm gonna head to bed, goodnight-" Asher said quickly and began walking to his room.

"Hang on- can we talk for a minute?" Daniel asked, keeping his tone soft- but clearly he knew something was wrong.

"How about in the morning? I'm exhausted-" Asher muttered.

"Asher, wait–" Lance started, but Asher was already shutting the door and locking it behind him.

Vesper was sitting on the bed holding Calypso, who sprung out of his arms upon seeing Asher. She scurried across the floor and climbed up his leg, then his chest, where he wrapped his arms loosely around her.

"Hey-..." He mumbled to Vesper, going to sit next to him. Calypso still tried to go everywhere with him that she could, but Asher absolutely refused to let her tag along for this.

"Hello. How did it go? Are you hurt?" Vesper asked, looking Asher over as a few tentacles wrapped around Asher's arms.

"No, I'm fine- it was really quick, in and out. I guess we won't even know for sure if it worked until tomorrow on the news, but I'm certain that it did work-" Asher replied, keeping his voice quiet. He leaned against Vesper, resting his head on his shoulder.

"Good… You should get some sleep, you seem tired." Vesper said softly, and Asher nodded a little. He really was tired, and more than eager to curl up with Vesper.

"Mhm… goodnight, dove-" He responded quietly. Vesper laid them both down, hugging Asher tightly.

Asher sighed and closed his eyes, feeling himself pulled into a deep sleep.

The next morning he jolted awake to the sound of someone knocking on the door. Vesper hugged him tighter, clearly a little startled as well.

“Uh- h-hello?” Asher stammered, his heart still beating quickly from being woken so suddenly.

“Hey, Asher- can we talk now?” Lance asked from the other side of the door- he sounded annoyed.

“... Can- can I get a minute? I’ll be out soon-” Asher mumbled, internally dreading what he was sure was to come as soon as he walked out that door.

“... Fine. Meet me upstairs in Daniel’s room.” Lance grumbled and walked off.

Asher sighed and glanced at Vesper, who was watching him with a look of concern.

“Can I go with you?” Vesper asked softly. Calypso chittered from where she was curled up still on Asher’s pillow.

“No way in hell I’m going to talk to Lance *without* you two-” Asher muttered in response.

So Vesper and Asher changed and quickly readied themselves, then Asher set Calypso up on his shoulder and the three of them headed up the stairs to Daniel’s room- Daniel was waiting in the main office-like room, leaning against a wall until Asher and Vesper stepped in.

“Hey, Lance is waiting in my room. I wanted to talk to you for a second before we go in there, alright? Lance is pretty upset, but I’m going to do my best to mediate- Amelia is there too-” Daniel spoke softly, and Asher just nodded a little, feeling like his throat was closing up.

They all walked into Daniel's room- Amelia and Lance were already taking up part of the couch, so Vesper immediately moved to sit between them and where Asher sat down.

Daniel pulled up another chair and sat in front of the couch, and Asher noticed Hilda slinking out of a shadowy corner of the room to curl up on the floor next to Daniel.

“Alright, let’s get right into it. Lance and I know that you two weren’t out getting food last night, at least not the entire night. You didn’t turn off your phone tracking, so what on earth were you doing at a random man's house for fifteen minutes last night?” Daniel asked, keeping his tone soft, but stern in a way that made it clear he wasn’t bullshitting around right now.

Amelia sighed, and Asher looked at her. His first instinct was to lie, but he recognized that that wouldn’t be the best logical option for this situation, so he figured he’d let her take the lead and say whatever she wanted to say.

“Okay, fine then-” She began, glancing at Asher to see his reaction. He just nodded slightly. “We went there to kill him. Because he was one of the main scientists set to begin working at that lab, testing on people. Asher saw a list, so we picked a name off of it. I sourced the poison, and I’m pretty sure we covered our tracks well enough- they’ll probably just assume he ate something wrong by accident or something.” Amelia explained, shrugging slightly.

Asher appreciated her leaving out some details, or intentionally being pretty vague about exactly who did what- he’d rather Lance not know he was basically making a personal hit list at this point and that’s how he selected their victim.

“Amelia! Why the hell would you even- who suggested it to begin with??” Lance demanded, his wings flaring up. Amelia shied away uncomfortably, probably from the heat- but she wasn’t nearly close enough to those beautiful, dangerous wings to be burned.

Amelia gave Asher a sort of panicked look, clearly not knowing what to say.

“... I did.” Asher mumbled, and Lance’s attention was instantly turned on Asher.

He had gotten pretty good at tuning out most of Lance’s lectures- he’d had to sit through enough of them. He just found a nice patch of fur on Hilda’s pelt to zone out on, watching the way her fur rippled with each breath she took.

Daniel tried calming Lance down, but it really didn’t seem to work

until Lance finally realized that Asher was too checked out to really absorb any of this anyways. Asher only found himself snapping back when Lance flopped back onto the couch with a huff, having apparently gotten up at some point.

“Asher- are you okay?” Daniel asked with a touch of concern. It took Asher a moment to find his eyes, but once he did he slowly started to feel like things were becoming more “real” around him again.

“... Yeah, I’m fine. Look, I don’t see what the point of this is- we killed him, it should slow down the progress at the lab or at the very least inconvenience them. I don’t regret it, and I’d do it again. People like that deserve to die.” Asher mumbled, his tone gradually becoming more firm as he spoke.

He realized far too late that he had apparently said the wrong thing, because of the downright disturbed looks he was getting from Danial and Lance. He shifted a bit awkwardly, tucking his wings close to himself.

“What? I’m not wrong.” He muttered, staring at the ground again.

“... Asher, I think maybe that’s something you should repeat to a psychologist. I’m sure I can find one that it won’t matter if you tell them all the less than legal parts, but this is- That’s *really* not a healthy way for you to be thinking, kid…” Daniel spoke softly, and Asher glared at him.

“I’m not a kid. It’s not- how is it unhealthy to think people like Klaus, or Burton, or- or that guy shouldn’t be allowed to keep hurting people??” Asher snapped.

“It’s not that part of it that’s unhealthy, dear- it’s–” Daniel began, but Lance began speaking loudly.

“It’s fucked up is what it is! That’s not at all- jesus, what happened in-between the time I moved out and you moved here?? You can be so *normal* and then you just- why-??” Lance demanded, his voice shaking slightly as Asher cringed.

“Woah, take it down a notch Lance-...” Amelia muttered.
“I’m not fucking normal! None of us are-! Glad to see you only care about what happened to me now, when it’s relevant to you.” Asher snapped, standing up. Vesper moved to stand up with him.

“Where the fuck do you think you’re going?” Lance reached out to

grab Asher's arm, and Asher stiffened. It was unfortunate, and he was sure Lance hadn't intended it, but Asher's dad had said that exact thing before while doing that exact grabbing motion, and suddenly Asher wasn't here, surrounded by people that he cared about.

He was at his dad's house, just the two of them alone, surrounded by darkness and the smell of alcohol. So Asher did the one thing he could never do as a kid, and he ran.

He yanked himself away and bolted for the door, tears stinging his eyes as he quickly navigated his exit route. There were footsteps behind him- it was like when he was running from those cops after what happened to his mom, that same feeling of panic ripping through his chest with each heartbeat and the adrenaline coursing through his veins.

He could have a similar escape to that day- it was probably his best bet, but it was hard to think so quick. Everything was moving *too fucking fast* and the next thing he knew he was pushing open the door to the roof.

His hands were shaking as he stumbled out onto the roof, turning his head to look behind him. Maybe if he wasn't being chased he could stop, take a breath, and think about what the fuck he was doing.

Calypso had latched onto his shoulder and was trilling, sounding frantic as she tried to get Asher's attention, but he couldn't focus on them right now.

He saw a vague figure approaching from the dim lighting inside the little roof hatch room, and that's all it took to send him off again- he wasn't even sure who it was that he saw.

He dove off the side of the roof, spreading his wings and soaring easily through the freezing air, the wind whipping his face as he tucked his wings inwards so he'd start losing altitude at a controlled pace.

He fell and fell until he could land in an alley- but he couldn't just wait around here to be found- he needed to *leave* .

This wasn't his home, it never was. And it never will be.

And right now, there was only one place he could think to go. Not because he'd find the comfort of home there, but because if he couldn't have a *home* he could at least seek his revenge for the person who had truly ensured he would never feel safe anywhere.

He chose to momentarily ignore the fact that it was actually quite a lengthy list of people who had made it impossible for him to feel safe.

In fact, he did his best to block out all of his thoughts as he began shakily walking out into the street, slightly disoriented. Everything was a little fuzzy, muffled- it was a feeling he hadn't felt in a while.

It was nice to not *feel* for a minute. He was so tired of *feeling* - the fear, the anxiety, the weight of everything *crushing* down on him.

So he allowed his grip on the world to slip a little- although "allowed" might not be the best word for what he was experiencing, but he found that he just didn't *care* .

Once he figured out where he was, he made his way to the bus stop, and bought himself a ticket "home".

Chapter End Notes

> I know that busses don't usually use "ticket" systems, but I thought it made it sound cooler okay 🧐
> Also, Vesper playing Block Blast every day was a head canon requested by a friend so it's canon now

Crimson skies

Chapter Summary

> This chapter was a bit of a doozy, trigger warnings for it will be listed in the end notes to avoid spoilers, but please be sure to check them if you're worried about the content!
> Also surprise I actually have the chapters mostly finished :D
> I had more I wanted to put in here but Ao3 didn't save my draft and I forgot what I put sorry :(

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The bus could only take Asher so far before he needed to get off and continue on foot, but it had gotten him far enough.

The ride was long enough for him to calm down, but not enough for him to return fully back to reality, so he was still in a bit of a haze as he made his way through the somewhat familiar streets of the town he currently found himself in.

He pulled out his phone to check it for the first time this trip- he'd run away a few hours ago by now, and that was more than enough time to receive countless calls from Lance, Amelia, Daniel, Vesper, and even Chardy. He had quite a number of messages as well, but he didn't bother checking them at the moment.

He had too many other things on his mind as he finally approached what he'd been looking for.

The house he grew up in looked weathered, old far beyond its years where it sat in the overgrown property. It reminded him of how his mom looked so much older than she was- because his father could do nothing but suck the life out of everyone and everything around him, even this house that was once so full of life.

He stepped around all the old trash- mostly beer bottles- to make his way up to the front door. The whole place smelled like rot and decay even from the outside, and the stench of alcohol and whatever other drugs his dad had been consuming was overwhelming.

It wrapped around him, ensnaring him as it dragged him back to some of his worst memories. But that only fueled his fire, ensured him that he needed to do what he came here to do.

He reached for the old, rusty doorknob and twisted it. The door practically fell open with a loud squeal- Asher cringed as he stepped into the dark, rancid house.

He heard the sound of something thudding heavily upstairs- surely his father, having heard the noise of his entry and was attempting to come downstairs and investigate.

He quickly shut the front door again, not bothering to be quiet as he waded through garbage to make it to the kitchen. Flicking on the light, he saw that the kitchen was by far the cleanest room in the house, surprisingly.

Maybe he was making it up, but he could swear that on the tiled kitchen floor he could just make out the faint outline of blood stains from the attack.

He shuddered and forced his gaze away, not wanting to see those images right now. Instead he went to open a specific drawer- it had been so long since he'd been here, but he could never forget this place. Not fully.

He had opened the knife drawer, and found his exact target. A kitchen knife, very similar to the one that he'd held onto for years after what happened to his mom. He wished he could've had that one with him, but this one that was bought in the same set as the other would work just as well.

The blade for this one was a little longer and curved slightly upward, but it was surely dull by now. So shuffling around a little more, he was able to find the honing steel and begin sharpening the cold metal.

It was then that he heard heavy thumping stumbling down the stairs. He *should* be scared, he should be terrified. But he wasn't, he just leaned against the counter nonchalantly as he sharpened his weapon of choice.

When his father darkened the entryway into the kitchen, he froze and stared at Asher with wide eyes.

"... What the hell 're you doin' here?" The man's voice was raspy,

gruff- like he hadn't used it in weeks. There was some anger in that tone, but mostly just shock.

Asher took his time drawing the blade against the metal rod, doing his best not to cringe at the horrible screeching sound it made. Calypso- who he'd momentarily forgotten about- writhed to free herself from his pocket where she had been hiding.

He did nothing to stop them as they scurried out onto the counter and instantly recoiled upon seeing his father. The little dragon hissed, his hackles raising as he slunk back behind Asher, who just stared up at his father with a dull expression.

"Just thought I'd come for a visit, *dad* ." He spoke the words with toxicity dripping from his voice as he pushed away from the counter and made his way closer to the man, whose eyes were still wide with surprise.

"... Get out. Get out of my fucking hou–" The man began in a loud, stern tone- but before he could even finish his sentence Asher drove the knife deep into his stomach.

He watched as his father gasped, doubling over as he reached to clutch his stomach. Asher yanked the knife out and took a step back, watching the pain flood into the man's blue eyes, which flew up to meet Asher's as tears began to gather in the corners.

Asher had always hated that they shared the same eye color- he hated looking into the mirror and seeing resemblance to this man in his own face. He might have forgotten what his mom looked like, but he knew he'd forever be cursed with the memory of this face before him, now scrunched up in agony as he dropped to his knees on the floor, the blood spurting out of his open wound and pooling out below him as Asher had gotten painfully used to seeing.

"A-asher-" The man stammered, his voice tight as Asher brought the knife up to his fathers throat.

"I hope you rot in the deepest pit of whatever hell comes after this." Asher murmured as he lowered himself down to be on eye level with his father, the knife still pressed so firmly against his neck that it was drawing blood. "Fuck. You." He hissed as he drove the knife into the man's neck with a quick slashing motion before he could get out another word.

Asher never got the chance to beg, to speak at all whenever his father

had decided to beat him bloody, hurt him until he couldn't even attempt to escape. He saw no reason to give the man the chance to plead now.

He drew black as the blood began to spray out of the open wound- the man fell back with a horrid wheezing sound as he was no longer able to draw in air through his severed esophagus.

There was panic in that cold blue gaze, but it was only a matter of seconds before the life drained out of him and he slumped back. Limp, but likely not quite dead yet- it would take a bit longer for his brain to fully run out of oxygen and call it quits.

It was an uncomfortable sight, seeing all that blood covering the kitchen floor again. He wasn't sure how long he found himself just staring at the lifeless body, but he only snapped back to the sound of the knife falling out of his hands and colliding with the floor. It was loud enough to make him jump, and suddenly snap somewhat back into reality.

He needed to get out of here, and find a place to settle down for a minute out of sight of everyone. He quickly went and washed his hands, though there was surely some blood on his clothes- they were all dark in color anyway so he didn't bother with that right now.

He just went and scooped up Calypso from where he was huddled on the counter, looking horrified as he watched the scene unfold. Perhaps that's what Asher would be feeling right now too, if he could feel that much of anything at all right now.

"Shh, it's okay." He whispered, though he was sure his voice sounded far from comforting right now.

He walked right back out the front door and out into the street, but he realized he didn't really know where to go now. Back to Daniel and everyone certainly wasn't an option- he couldn't stay anywhere near here either.

Then it hit him- one person who was neither here nor there. He couldn't say he particularly trusted her to keep his secrets, but he could certainly at least stay for a day or two to gather himself.

So with that, he began heading to Melinda's house. They would speak on occasion, she'd always text him on his birthday or any other holiday, but it was always kept pretty casual and they didn't talk often.

But he still remembered her address, so he started making his way there, which seemed to be the only action he took today that made Calypso happy. He could feel her discontent with him, and it weighed heavy, but not as heavy as the relief of knowing he'd never have to see his father's face again.

His trip to Melinda's house was all a blur, and the next thing that he knew he was curled up on her couch, wrapped up in a blanket with a warm cup of tea in his hands.

It was a strange feeling, like having just woken up from a dream.

"How are you feeling, dear…?" Melinda asked softly, causing him to jump slightly. It was a surprise he didn't spill any of his tea, but he was glad he didn't because it probably would've burned him.

"... I'm okay…" He mumbled. Calypso was curled up in Melinda's lap, sleeping and purring softly like a cat.

"Do you think you can tell me what happened now, and where that blood came from..?" She inquired. Her tone was so gentle- he almost wanted to just break and tell her everything.

Then he realized there wasn't really a reason *not* to tell her. It would only be a matter of time before between her and Daniel they would be able to put the pieces together and figure out what he did, so it might sound better if it came from him.

"I… I killed my dad-" He muttered, his voice coming out weaker than he was hoping.

"... Oh my…" She whispered, but she didn't sound surprised.

"Please don't tell Daniel I'm here…" He murmured.

"I know, dear… you already asked me not to, remember..?" She asked, her tone growing worried.

"Oh…" He sighed and slumped back into the couch, twitching his wings uncomfortably from where they were all wrapped up under the blanket.

Melinda had asked him a few more questions, but Asher was all too happy to zone back out and let himself just feel dead to the world for a bit longer.

She got him set up in the spare room- he didn't realize that she had one the first time he stayed the night here, but he had essentially passed out on her couch that time to be fair.

It was a very restless night he ended up spending looking through all of the messages and voicemails he'd gotten.

It was very similar to any of the other times he'd run off, with Lance's flurry of emotions and pretty much everyone else just rephrasing ways to ask him to come home.

He felt a little bad, the guilt just beginning to sink its claws into his chest through the thick fog of dissociation. He missed Vesper most of all- he wanted nothing more than to have Vesper here with him.

So after much deliberating, at about one a.m he texted Vesper.

"im sorry i ran away. i prmse im safe, i love you" Was all that he sent. Vesper texted back almost immediately.

"Where are you?"

"plz dont tell dan" He texted back after a minute.

"I won't, just please tell me where you are." Vesper sent, and Asher could practically hear the pleading in his silent words.

"i went to melindas house bcz i killed my dad" Asher's fingers shook as he typed the message and sent it. There was a long pause between the messages, and Asher was starting to get nervous that Vesper was going to tell Daniel anyway.

"Is there a way I can get to you?" Vesper finally texted.

"no safely, but i miss you. im sorry. im going to try and see you tmrow" Asher replied.

"Okay, you need to get some sleep. I'll see you soon my stardust" Vesper sent back, and Asher sighed.

He set his phone down on the bed next to him and curled up on his side. Calypso lightly nudged against his face, trilling with concern.

"Sorry… I don't know what's going on…" Asher mumbled, closing his eyes as he lightly set a hand on top of her, almost like a blanket for her. She nuzzled against his hand and relaxed a little as they both attempted yet again to go to sleep.

The next morning, Asher stumbled out of the room and into the kitchen where Melinda was. She was humming and cooking something, but there was a faint nervous energy in the air.

“Oh, good morning my dear!” She smiled at Asher when she saw him, but there was something a little odd about it. “Are you hungry? I’m making oatmeal-”

Asher could feel his stomach begin to growl, but he didn’t deserve to eat. Besides, Vesper would probably make him eat later when he saw him.

“Not really, but thank you-” He forced a small smile, then hesitated a second. “Are you okay?”

She paused, looking at Asher with a very serious expression.

“Asher, there’s something really important I need to tell you, and I need to apologize as well-” She started, speaking slowly and cautiously.

“... What is it?” He asked, his throat going dry.

“Daniel called me early this morning and asked if you were here, and I *know* you told me not to tell him, but my dear- he was panicking. See… he sent a few of the others on another mission last night, because the lab didn’t slow down what they were doing and had apparently already found a test subject. But… the people that he sent- they never returned, they were captured.” Melinda spoke softly, and it was like all the air was sucked out of the room.

“What..? Who- who was it?” Asher asked, his voice quickly becoming frantic.

“I think you ought to go home and speak to Daniel, my dear-...” Melinda trailed off.

“Who got captured??” Asher demanded, raising his voice, and Melinda sighed.

“It was Francis-... and Lance-” Melinda reluctantly answered. Asher stiffened, hardly noticing Calypso crawling up onto his shoulder as everything started to feel incredibly muffled again.

Without a second thought, he turned and headed quickly for the front door.

“Asher, dear, please hang on just a second-” Melinda hastily followed him, but to Asher’s surprise Calypso hissed, and with that hiss she released a small pale, sort of pinkish flame. He wasn’t aiming right at Melinda, but close enough for her to gasp and jump back.

Asher knew that Calypso *could* produce fire, but he’d never actually seen them do it. He took those few extra seconds to dart out the front door and jog down to the street. He was sure Melinda was still following him, but he was much faster than her.

“Thanks, Cal-” He muttered in-between breaths as he sprinted to the nearest bus stop. He hesitated once he got there though- it would take him *hours* to get to the city this way, and that was time he simply couldn’t afford to waste.

He glanced at his wings, shuffling them slightly. Calypso gave an approving chirp, so he took off and began flying.

He might’ve second guessed this right about now, but with Calypso seemingly encouraging him he didn’t even stop to think. Daniel always said Calypso was a manifestation of what he was truly like, deep inside- so perhaps deep down he wasn’t *as* bad as he thought he was. Not so bad that he wouldn’t go save his brother and his friend, at least.

It was then that it hit him.

Dexter.

He couldn’t fucking believe that he’d forgotten that list- the one with Dexter’s fucking name on it that Asher was sure meant he was planning on selling Lance out to be experimented on.

“Shit!” He shouted, startling even Calypso. He began muttering curses as he flapped his wings as hard as he could, propelling himself faster and faster through the cold air.

Of course that was only made worse by the rain clouds gathering in the sky, which quickly began pelting down on him. It made his wings and his clothes heavy after only a few minutes, but flying was just so much *faster* than taking a bus. It didn’t matter how tired he was, his adrenaline would kick in once he got there.

He had already covered what would've been about two hours of driving in just over thirty minutes- he just had to hang on a bit longer to make it far enough into the city that he could run the rest of the way.

His wings were aching by the time he was able to land- it was like a burning fire spreading deep into his core. He hadn't had to fly that hard that quickly probably ever before, and he was certain the only reason he could do it was because of pure adrenaline.

Regardless, he hit the ground running. He pushed past countless people walking in herds with their umbrellas, ignoring as they cursed at him and told him to watch out.

It was like tunnel vision, and he only had one clear destination.

Calypso had hidden himself back in Asher's jacket, and Asher quickly found himself desperately wishing he'd had a gun. It was during business hours, there would be people there- and the security guards had guns. He had just enough time to form half of a plan when he finally approached the lab, swinging around the back alley to enter through that hidden door.

It was left unlocked, likely because it was an exit for janitors. He wasn't sure if the laser alarms were active during the day, but he had no way to find out as the lights were on in the hallway now- so he walked in a pattern he was pretty sure he'd used to avoid the lasers before and just hoped it wouldn't set them off.

Making it to the end of the hall, he entered the first room and was relieved to see that no one was in there. No wonder they didn't find any important information there, no one likely used this specific area much.

He made his way through the building, which looked much different now that it was all lit up. Passing through the hallway that Theodore had shot someone in, he shuddered as a quick image of it flashed before him before he pushed it away to continue his mission.

He froze up as a security officer suddenly rounded the corner, also freezing upon seeing him.

"Hey, you're not supposed to be here-" The guard began, slowly reaching for something clipped onto the back of his belt, just out of Asher's line of vision.

“No no, I am- I’m one of the experiments-” He began, pushing his power into his tone. Calypso shifted uncomfortably, but he ignored her for now as he continued speaking. “I just got a little bit turned around. I apologize- but uh, see they asked me about different things that-... trigger my distress levels the most, and I told them I’d try to find a guard because guns… shit, man, I’m scared to even *hold* one. So I told the scientists I’d grab one from one of you guys cuz you have backup ones somewhere, so can I please have your gun and then can you please show me the way back to where they’re mainly doing the experiments right now?” Asher rambled, because the longer he talked the better his power worked. He was entirely bullshitting his way through this, hoping he was assuming things correctly. And it was clear the guard was falling for it, hook, line, and sinker. He seemed oddly susceptible, but Asher didn’t have time to mull over what was probably just a coincidence right now. Especially not such a helpful coincidence.

“... Okay, okay- sure. Come on then-” The man mumbled, sounding slightly dazed as he passed Asher his gun. Asher took it, forcing his hands to shake so he’d seem more scared.

Then he followed the security guard through the winding halls, doing his best to keep track of exactly where they went. Left, left, right. He needed to keep talking.

“Thank you so- so much for this. I uh- I’m just so nervous, you know?” Asher mumbled- they passed by two people in white lab coats, talking and too busy looking over some papers on a clipboard to pay Asher and the guard much time.

They went straight past two turn-offs, then got into an elevator. The man pressed on the fourth floor button.

“Makes sense, I guess.” The man muttered, clearly not much of a talker.

“How long have you been working for this place? It’s uh- really interesting, I mean- the work they do-... it seems really advanced-” Asher carried on the forced conversation. The man sighed heavily as he turned right down what was probably the longest hallway they had encountered. It was lined with doors on both sides, all directly across from each other. They were all pastel blue to pair with the harsh white of the walls, ceiling, floors, and lights.

“Alright, we’re here.” The man stopped outside of a door with a brass

plaque that had “Dr. Smith” engraved on it. “Just head straight in, the main scientists will be in there. I think they’re having a meeting about that other new test subject.”

Asher nodded a bit and reached out, placing a hand on the shiny silver doorknob. He froze, his entire body stiffening in a similar way to when he was being electrocuted, but without the intense pain that followed. Instead he just felt this *strong* sense of foreboding, images of his fathers angry, drunken face as Asher was relentlessly beaten by him. But he *couldn’t* react, like he was physically stuck in place.

It was only made worse as the imagery of Dexter replaced those of his father- being pinned down and *touched* . A lot of it he always did his best to block out, to forget- but the feeling of hands *wandering* in places they shouldn’t would never truly leave him, no matter how much he pushed it all away, into the back corners of his mind.

He shuddered, his body finally being released as those memories and images ridded themselves of his head. He felt like he was going to collapse- he was shaking, and he felt like he wanted to throw up. When he looked around he noticed that the guy next to him was looking just as pale and shaky as Asher felt.

What the hell was that? It felt like some sort of psychic attack, which just meant Asher needed to get into that room even more now because *holy shit* .

He twisted the knob and pushed open the door- inside was a conference type room, but inside looked like a fucking *wreck* . The five scientists in the room were clearly not immune to whatever was happening- but that didn’t mean they weren’t the ones causing it.

All five of them were men, varying in ages from mid-thirties to somewhere over fifty- but Asher didn’t take note of exactly who they were or what they all looked like. Instead his attention was drawn to the massive viewing window inside- it was like an even bigger version of the common ones inside of the regular testing rooms, but with a similarly sized panel in front of it. Despite being similar in size, all the buttons and notches were very different.

It wasn’t particularly the existence of this room and everything in it, but rather who was *inside* .

He went slightly pale as he stumbled over to the window- whatever effects had apparently hit everyone in the nearby vicinity clearly hadn’t worn off of the older men as quickly as it had to Asher, because

most of them were still very preoccupied trying to collect themselves and collectively catch their breaths, still stuck on the floor or leaned against walls.

He was still shaky, but not nearly as bad off as they were as he peered inside, pressing his hand against the cold glass.

“Dexter..?” He whispered, his eyes widening.

Inside the room, chained and strapped into a metal, midevil looking chair, was fucking *Dexter* .

He looked miserable, with huge bags under his eyes and his skin flushed a light shade of pink. There were these long metal prods protruding from the ceiling, attached to complex contraptions that looked like metal arms to lower them downwards. And he was wearing a collar very similar to the ones Asher and Vesper had once worn- maybe just a bit bulkier.

Asher had been wrong- Dexter wasn’t selling out Lance, he had sold out *himself* .

But Dexter wasn’t supposed to have a power- maybe they were trying to force him to develop one?

As one of the metal prods, supposedly on a timer, jabbed into Dexter’s side and electrocuted him, everyone in the room was hit with another wave of his insane mental attack.

Asher yelped as he suddenly hit the floor, feeling a *burning* sensation all over his body.

When he turned, he saw Lance grabbing him- touching him with his wings and burning his skin, melting the flesh off of his bones like fucking putty.

He screamed as he frantically tried to pull away from Lance, his entire body wrapped in an absolutely *searing* pain, it was blinding. But Lance wouldn’t *let go* - he was grabbing him, *touching* –

No, that wasn’t right. *Lance* wasn’t touching him- his eyes flew open as the burning died away, and his flesh was no longer melting. He wasn’t burned- instead he was staring up at a very disheveled looking man holding one of those metal devices like the ones that kept electrocuting Dexter.

“No- nonono- back- back the fuck up-” His voice was trembling, and it all sounded so far away- he wasn’t sure if he was actually even talking or not.

Whipping his head around side-to-side, he saw that Lance wasn’t anywhere in the room with them. He shakily pulled out his gun, pointing it up at the scientist, who was clearly saying *something* , but it was all muffled.

The man took a few steps backwards and lifted his hands into the air as Asher forced himself to his feet, barely keeping his hold on the gun. He realized he was pressed back against a flat surface, but it wasn’t a wall- it was a door. The door into Dexter’s room. He hesitated, his mind running a million miles an hour but somehow not managing to conjure up a single thought all at once.

The hand that wasn’t holding the gun fumbled with the door, managing to slide it open just enough for him to get inside, just as another wave of horror began.

He hardly had time to see Dexter writhing in pain from his confines of the chair before his vision was shrouded in darkness. He thought for a second that he was going blind, but he could faintly seem to make out some *textures* - he just couldn’t tell what they were supposed to be. Some sort of fabric, perhaps- but it wasn’t all pressed right up against his face like a blindfold or bag over his head.

He tried to move, to stand up- but he *couldn’t* . Every time he tried to move it was like there were invisible restraints blocking him. He began thrashing wildly, his breath stuttering as he felt himself beginning to panic. He couldn’t breath, he couldn’t *think* .

It was all ended harshly as his face was doused in freezing cold water, leaving him gasping for breath and frantically looking around as his vision returned to him.

Nothing around made sense- when the hell did Chardy get here? No, no- it couldn’t be, his leg wasn’t hurt, that wasn’t Chardy.

Blinking rapidly, he watched as Chardy’s face twisted up and began deforming, morphing into the face of another scientist. He could no longer feel the gun in his hand- he had no clue where it was, but he wasn’t worried about that right now.

He needed to get Dexter out of that fucking chair before whatever they were doing to him killed them all- he could feel his own energy

draining rapidly as if it were *his* powers being over-exerted, but there was simply *no way* his abilities would make him capable of something like this- forcing everyone around to witness and *feel* some of the worst experiences their own brains can imagine for them.

Well, maybe not the worst- Asher was sure he could come up with worse things to happen, but perhaps they would all be much too elaborate to recreate in such quick, painful bursts.

Stumbling to his feet, he lunged over to Dexter in his chair, leaning against part of it as he grabbed onto one of the metal rods. It was cool to the touch, and no thicker than the blade of a knife. He was glad to see that only the end of it was where the electricity came out, so it was safe to touch everywhere else on it.

Grabbed on with both hands, he yanked the metal back as hard as he could until it bent far enough that when it was moved forwards again, it still wouldn't touch Dexter.

But there was still the other one, and he didn't have time to stop it before the automatic timer made it lower towards Dexter's neck.

"No no no no-" He curled up on the ground, closing his eyes and covering his ears in anticipation. It seemed to be relatively visual-based, if he didn't *see* what horrors were going on around him, his brain might not force him to feel them.

It was only a matter of seconds before he realized how wrong he was as he felt a trickle of water beginning to curl around his legs, quickly rising up. His eyes snapped open again to see the room filling with dark, murky brown water. He panicked slightly as he tried to lift himself up to stay above the water, but it raised just as quickly with him.

There was a heavy pressure around his chest as the water flowed around his shoulders- the sound of water swishing and dripping around him would be comforting if it weren't marking his own torment.

He stiffened as he heard Calypso shriek from somewhere nearby, calling for help. He quickly looked around for her- just turning in time to see her head disappear below a wave of water.

He lunged to reach out for her, taking a quick breath as he dove under the water and frantically felt around for his dragon. He tried to open his eyes, but it was too dark- he could hardly see his own hands as he

felt around the floor for them.

When he felt himself running out of breath, he kicked off the floor and sprang upwards to get up above the water as quickly as possible.

That plan was quickly shattered as he hit what must've been the ceiling, which the water was now already up to, leaving no air left in the room.

Quickly panicking, he felt around for any air pockets- his lungs burned, screaming for air as he felt himself beginning to grow faint. His limbs were moving too slow through the water, like he was in a dream, and it was only fueling his panic. Not being able to think clearly, he got turned around and dove back down towards the floor- only to find that it wasn't there.

He was suspended by endless water on all ends, and he was going to pass out any fucking second. He just started to lose consciousness when all of the sudden he jerked up from where he had apparently been laying down on the ground, gasping for air as dark, swirly spots clouded his vision.

"Holy fuck- holy fucking shit-" He whispered, trembling as he looked around. Calypso was alive, safe, and clinging onto him with a wild look of panic in her eyes. Even spirit animals must not be safe from this sort of attack.

He jumped up, nearly falling right back over- he was having a hard time controlling his limbs properly, almost like during the aftermath of his electrocution.

Grabbing on to the other metal pole, the world was spinning around him as he *yanked* , bending it backwards once again as far as he could.

As soon as it was pulled back far enough, he let go and practically fell to the ground, his wings sprawling out behind him. But he still couldn't fucking *focus* - maybe that's why everyone had seemed so much worse off than Asher, because they had already gone through this several times and your recovery time increased between each bought of overpowering hallucinations.

As he attempted to control his breathing, he spotted his gun lying on the floor a few feet away- right near the man Chardy had morphed into earlier, who was still curled up on the floor, retching and dry-heaving as he was recovering from his own psychic attack.

Throwing himself off of the ground, Asher lunged for the gun and grabbed onto it, clutching it close to his chest as he pushed himself into a corner of the room.

Everything was foggy and felt like it was moving too slowly- he looked up at Dexter, who was panting heavily as he too was recovering. He never thought he'd ever find himself wanting to save Dexter so much.

It only took a moment for him, and everyone else to mostly recover now they weren't being mentally assaulted every few seconds. Now Asher was really panicking, because now it was very, very real as the rest of the scientists poured into the room- followed by a security guard.

"You guys need to fucking *stop* -" Asher shouted as he stood up, still leaning heavily against the wall and keeping himself backed into the corner.

"Who are you and how did you get in here?? He isn't supposed to have anyone coming in here for him." Dr. Smith snapped.

"I'm not here for *him* . But now-" Asher's voice shook as he took several shaky steps, crossing the room to stand directly in front of Dexter, who was staring up at him with a dull expression until a quick flash of recognition crossed his green eyes. Asher glared down at him, cocking the gun in his hand and lifting up so the barrel was inches away from Dexter's head. He watched as the man stiffened, his eyes widening as he tried to pull back, but was held in place by his restraints. Asher smirked slightly. "Now, I'm going to ask a few questions, or he dies."

Chapter End Notes

> Trigger warnings include but are not limited to: Blood, some gore (poorly written but still), violence, murder, human experimentation, torture, electrocution, hallucinations, drowning, body horror (sort of), guns, threatening people with a gun

Stone cold crazy

Chapter Summary

Definitely didn't get this chapter's title idea from The Other Side of Paradise fr
This chapter actually had me stressing you guys I really hope it's as good as I meant for it to be, but I know the descriptions of pain were definitely lacking because I couldn't find enough words to describe it 😩
Also once again trigger warnings will be in the end notes!
Also also, Samson is SUPPOSED to be really confusing in this chapter, and every chapter. What he does isn't supposed to make any sense and he is acting like multiple different people

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Don’t shoot! Please, we’ll tell you whatever you need to know-” A different scientist- Dr. Martina, according to his name tag- spoke quickly.

“Good. What the *fuck* is his power? He’s not- I’ve known him my whole life, he’s not supposed to have one. Did you fucking psychos manage to find a way to *force* people to develop an ability?” Asher demanded, pressing the gun directly against Dexter’s forehead to emphasize that was *not* afraid to pull the trigger.

“What? We learned about him *because* of his power.” Dr. Smith replied. Asher turned his gaze back to Dexter, who despite being exhausted and in pain, could still muster up a cocky little grin.

“What..? Can’t- can’t expect me to tell you all my secrets, can ya..?” Dexter spoke, his voice raspy and weak. Asher stomped down on Dexter’s foot as hard as he could, causing Dexter to yelp in pain and yank against his restraints because of how unexpected it was, but Asher was sure he couldn’t have really hurt Dexter that much.

“Shut the fuck up. You-” Asher pointed back at Dr. Smith. “What’s his power? I won’t ask again.”

“It’s- we don’t have a name for it, it’s like a *poison* . A chemical poison

he releases- when he came to us, he could do it by touching someone or being around someone for long enough, the longer the contact lasted the better that it worked. He was able to infect people's minds, alter their thoughts and feelings- it was weak, but it was there. Obviously with our work, he can do much much more now- we were just shocked to see it happen so quickly. Usually someone of his age would be beyond developing his ability much further, but this… it's groundbreaking, and just shows how little we actually know." Dr. Smith replied, speaking quickly to make it clear he didn't want to lose Dexter and was more than willing to answer Asher's questions.

Asher narrowed his eyes, watching out for everyone's movements as the scientist explained. Gears were turning in his head, dots were connecting- but it was all interrupted by a loud series of explosions.

The ground beneath them shook like there was an earthquake, and outside of the testing room in the main office objects were thrown from their places on bookshelves or desks.

It was ear-splittingly loud, but he didn't dare pull the gun away from Dexter's head as he used his other hand to cover one of his ears. Calypso screeched in pain from the noise, frantically trying to bury her head in some loose fabric on Asher's clothes to get any relief from the sounds.

Asher was nearly knocked to his knees by how violently everything was *quaking* , but he managed to keep himself standing and the gun pressed to Dexter's head. The scientists began shouting frantically at each other, but he could hardly hear them- and he was sure they couldn't hear each other either.

It only lasted a few seconds- maybe twenty, before the sounds rather abruptly stopped and the shaking slowed until everything felt normal. The room outside was left in disarray, likely the same as the whole rest of the building, but in this one didn't have any objects that weren't attached to the floor or walls.

Now he could hear the scientists, they were arguing and clamouring over themselves to get out of the room.

"Stop!" Asher pointed the gun down at Dexter's foot- the one he'd stepped on, and without hesitation he pulled the trigger. Everyone went silent as they all turned and stared with wide eyes, seemingly thinking that Asher had actually killed Dexter at first.

The sharp ringing from the shot stung his ears, but even that pain felt

oddly muffled.

“MotherFUCKER! Holy shit-!” Dexter screamed in pain, writhing around in his chair. Asher couldn’t find it in him to feel bad for Dexter.

“We are *not* done here.” Asher hissed, his mind fuzzy from the proximity of the shot.

“We- we need to figure out what just happened, no one else will have the clearance to–” One of the “doctors” who hadn’t spoken to Asher yet said in a frantic voice.

“Then go, but *he* stays.” Asher gestured to Dr. Smith. Clearly the older man had expected more of his comrades to want to stay with him, because he looked slightly shocked as everyone else quickly evacuated the room without risking another word.

“I need to go–” Smith started, but Asher shook the gun a little to remind the man of its existence, pushing it back against Dexter’s head. Dexter had tears streaming down his cheeks and kept whimpering from the pain in his foot, blood flooding the floor around them, but Asher knew it wasn’t a dangerous amount yet. Fucking *pathetic* .

“You are going to finish answering my fucking questions. You have two other people here, Lance and Francis. Where the fuck are they?” Asher spoke in a low tone.

“Ah, they’re uh- being kept on another floor. We have hardly continued experimentation on them but–” Dr. Smith started.

“Are they hurt? What *exactly* have you done to them?” Asher snapped, speaking over him.

“Sorry- sorry- just- we have just been uh- keeping them restrained, and some electrocution- not as intense as this as they aren’t in separate holding rooms. We had to stop because–” Dr. Smith was cut off again, but this time not by Asher.

The wall and the door into the office outside the testing room was blown down with an explosion that sent both Asher and Dr. Smith tumbling over to the side, shattering the glass to the window between the rooms and blowing out almost all of the lights so it became eerily dim.

Asher managed to support himself on Dexter’s chair, but as soon as

the ground was stable he pushed himself away from the now unconscious man with disgust.

Turning to face the source of the explosion, he found it nearly impossible to see through the thick dust that once made up a wall. But he could see a faint glow…

“Lance??” He shouted, taking a small step forward as he just managed to make out the shape of a pair of wings, glowing softly in the dimness.

“Asher?!” Lance’s voice replied, and in just a second the glowing figure approached him. Lance lunged over the wall, through the old window and landed in front of Asher.

He looked like shit- tired, probably in pain, and covered in dust- but he was such a welcomed sight to Asher right now.
Lance hugged Asher tightly, but kept his wings tucked back away from Asher. He could still feel the warmth of those wings as he leaned into Lance, hugging him back- he had to be careful to keep the gun pointed well away from Lance’s body.

“Oh my god, are you okay?? How the hell did you get here-?” Lance asked, pulling away slightly and looking Asher over.

Instantly Asher began to feel like he was going to pass out- his brain was falsely assuming that because Lance was here, he must be out of the dangerous situation, which meant his adrenaline was wearing off and fatigue was settling in its place.

“I’m- I’m fi–” Asher was cut off by a wave of that *feeling* crashing over him. Dexter must’ve woken up, and something must be hurting him *badly* , because Asher was no longer wrapped up in Lance’s arms, now he was back in that chair in Burton's basement.

Cursing and acting purely on instinct, he tried to fight his way out of the chair- everything was tingly and painful as the effects of electrocution set in, but it wasn’t as powerful as it would be if it was real.

It was like he could ignore the pain, and it wasn’t all-consuming as the pain of his previous hallucinations had been. Perhaps the more people were around, the weaker the visions were.

He yelped as the feeling suddenly got stronger, his entire body was pulsing in such a familiar, painful burn. It didn’t last long until he was

curled up, gasping on the floor of that lab again. He felt fuzzy, every time he blinked the world around him shifted and altered and spun, and he couldn't keep track of it.

Someone was talking to him, but it felt like the ground was rumbling again. There was a flashing light above him, and it kept fading in and out of sight as Asher's vision began to fail. Everything *hurt* , and the world felt so *far away* .

He closed his eyes, trying to force his muscles to relax like he did when he was being tortured. It wasn't that kind of pain he was in- he had no clue what the source of this was, but it wasn't nearly as bad.

Just a dull feeling, idly demanding his attention, but he could ignore it and he needed to focus on what was being said around him.

Right as he was just tuning in enough to make out Amelia's voice, he opened his eyes and looked up at where he was pretty sure she was. Lance was hunched over him, but he was looking behind himself at where Amelia stood, holding Asher's gun.

She was yelling- pointing the gun at someone too far out of Asher's vision to see. He only felt like he was just beginning to grasp what was happening when the trigger was pulled, and he couldn't hear again.

It was so *loud* , it echoed around the walls of his mind, and a harsh pain consumed him again as he watched flames burst up around him. The fire devoured his flesh, burning away everything as he watched helplessly, letting out a half formed scream.

He couldn't tell if it was real or fake, but it hurt all the same- it hurt even after he was sure his nerves had been burned away, it was pure agony and he couldn't fucking *move* .

He sobbed as he forced himself to focus his vision onto Lance, only to see his big brother standing up and moving *away* from him.

Did Lance do this? Did he set Asher on fire and leave him to burn?

He tried to reach out for Lance, but his burned, charred arm fell beside him as he saw Lance go to Dexter.

His brother had left him to die for *Dexter* .

And that was his last thought before he was finally blessed with the relief of passing out.

He had no idea how long it had been, or where the hell he was, but he knew that everything *ached* . He was conscious for what must have been several minutes before he was aware of what was going on around him, or could open his eyes.

“Shh, I know- I know… You’re okay, my stardust-” Vesper whispered. *Vesper* . Now that Asher was focusing, he could feel Vesper’s arms and tentacles wrapped all around him, securing him and grounding him. He was still in pain, but Vesper’s touch was such a *relief* .

He forced his eyes open to find that he was looking up at Vesper’s worried face, with the sky and walls surrounding them in what he assumed was an alley. There were sounds farther away- more explosions, and a loud rumbling. Vesper’s face was covered in dust and a few little blood splatters, and he looked tired.

“Vesper..? Where- where are we– are you okay-??” His voice became frantic as he tried to sit up, wincing as his muscles screamed in pain.

“No, no- relax- don’t move-” Vesper whispered firmly, tightening his hold on Asher to keep him still. Asher drew in a sharp breath as he nodded a bit and relaxed against Vesper again.

“Okay- okay…” He murmured.

“I’m so glad you’re alive, Asher…” Vesper mumbled, gently running a hand through Asher’s hair.

“What’s going on..?” Asher asked, and Vesper hesitated a second.

“Melinda called Daniel when you ran away from her house- we knew you were going to try and get Lance out. I suppose they had a plan to get him and Francis, but they didn’t fill me in on it. As soon as we learned you were on your way there, they planned to cut you off and meet you outside but come prepared in case there was a fight, but you got there first- you flew, right..?” Vesper began explaining.

“Yeah-...” Asher replied quietly.

“They initially didn’t bring me with, so it was Daniel with Hilda, Amelia, Lucinda, Victor, Theodore and Samson- and Melinda promised to try to get here too. They broke in and I assume found Francis and Lance- from what I gathered they went to find Dexter, who they figured out was one of the first test subjects they had found when

Lance was helping Daniel go over the information that was previously gathered. Lance freaked out and asked Samson to switch places with him for the third mission, which Daniel decided was still worth risking-" Vesper continued, turning his gaze away from Asher and farther down the alley.

Asher followed his gaze, stiffening when he saw Samson, leaning out of the alley and looking around before turning and walking back over to him and Vesper.

"I hadn't realized the mission would've gone so sideways, or I would've never agreed." Samson muttered as he knelt down, having apparently been listening to their whole conversation.

It unsettled Asher, but Vesper still seemed fine, so he relaxed slightly.

"Anyway, by the time I had showed up it was because I heard the explosions and saw helicopters. I found you in that room with Dexter, Lance, and-... Amelia. Some of the guards had entered the room- I'm not sure if you remember that or not, because you were unconscious when I got there and supposedly had been for a while when Lance went to free Dexter." Vesper's voice had gotten quiet when he spoke Amelia's name, and Asher suddenly stiffened.

"Is she okay..? Who did she shoot-..?" He mumbled, and Vesper's expression morphed to one of sadness.

"She didn't shoot anyone, Asher…" Vesper muttered.

"... but- No, I heard a gunshot-..." Asher trailed off, feeling himself pale.

"You heard the gunshot that hit *her* ." Samson murmured from beside Asher.

"Oh shit- no, is- is she okay?? Where is she- where is *everyone* ??" Asher tried to sit up again, but he felt that same pain as he forced himself to relax.

"They're all back there now- I showed up just in time, Daniel told me to take you and leave. Amelia-... He told me not to bring her with, because she was dead before she ever hit the ground." Vesper said softly, and tears welled in Asher's eyes.

He was rapidly entering a state of denial- no way Amelia was dead, she *couldn't* be. He was dreaming, this was another bout of Dexter's

toxins in his mind making him hallucinate this.

“No… I- I have to go back and get her- Vesper, let go-” Asher muttered, trying to lift himself up- but Vesper didn’t let go, he kept holding on to Asher.

“No, Asher- there’s nothing more we can do to help. Everyone is all together now, the guards wouldn’t stop attacking even as they tried to leave, so they’re fighting their way to get out. We can’t go back-” Vesper spoke firmly.

“I *have* to-” Asher replied, forcibly pushing Vesper away as he stumbled to his feet, tripping and fumbling over Vesper’s extra limbs.

Everything hurt, and he was dizzy- but he needed to get back there. It was like there was something physically pulling him- urging him on as he spread his wings and flapped heavily.

His wings were just long enough to scrape painfully against the walls of the cramped space, but not enough to keep him from flying up and over the walls that confined him, then looking around. The sky was still dark, but it wasn’t just because of the stormy clouds looming overhead. Now there were flurries of smoke, dark and tinted an odd almost red shade as they swirled up from the building he needed to get back to.

It looked like the whole thing was producing that smoke- like the entire building was lit on fire, but Asher knew that wasn’t possible.

“Asher, no!” Vesper shouted from down in the alley. Asher turned back and watched as Samson lifted himself up into the air with a slightly concerned expression.

Samson was so fucking *confusing* - why did it feel like he was actually trying to *help* Vesper and Asher now, when everyone knew he was stuck under Theodore’s thumb?

Asher raised himself up higher as he watched Vesper use his tentacles to scale the wall, rapidly approaching Asher.

“I’m sorry!” He shouted back- his voice was so raspy, and everything felt so distant and painful. He turned and took off towards the building, the rush of flying helped ease his pain a little. He still had no clue where it was coming from, because as far as he could tell he was just a little bruised and scraped.

Just before he disappeared into the cloud of smoke, he turned just in time to see that Samson was still following him and was now right on his tail- metaphorically, anyway.

As soon as he got close enough, he flew in through one of the busted down walls and landed hard on the floor. It was covered in glass and rubble, and the entire building felt like it was shaking.
That certainly wasn't a good sign- and the long cracks along the ceiling definitely weren't either.

He pulled up his shirt to cover his mouth as he looked around, instantly lost in the unrecognizable building when suddenly a stomach-churning thought hit him. Samson landed beside him, panting slightly.

"Asher, what the hell are you–!" Samson began to yell, but Asher's panicked voice cut through it.

"Calypso- where's Calypso??" He demanded, his eyes blown wide with panic. The best he could hope for was that Vesper had taken her too, and Asher just hadn't noticed the little dragon.

"Calypso-... your dragon?? You lost your fucking spirit guide?" Samson demanded, his eyes widening. Asher cringed a little- Samson was acting like a totally different person than he had ever acted around Asher- *again* . It was really pissing him off, but as long as Samson was feeling in a helpful mood, Asher was going to take advantage.

"Yes! I need to find her, and- and get Amelia-..." He trailed off, frantically looking around. Maybe Calypso had been why he felt so pulled here- maybe she was summoning him.

Samson looked like he was going to say something, but a defeated expression crossed his face as his shoulders slumped.

"... Okay, come on. You need to focus- see where he's pulling you." Samson responded firmly. Asher nodded a bit, and then took off.

They were too high up- so he made his way quickly through the rubble to find the stairs. He nearly fell down the first flight as another explosion shook the building, knocking his legs out from beneath him.

Samson grabbed him by the arm to keep him standing, and moving as he pulled Asher along without pause.

“Careful! Jesus.” Samson muttered, then hesitated. “...I’m sorry, Asher. Truly.” His voice was so quiet Asher wasn’t sure he’d heard him correctly, but there was no time to think about it right now.

He didn’t respond as they landed on the next platform, and Asher pushed through the door into a hallway. This floor was a little less destroyed, at least at this part- so it was much quicker as he ran as fast as his legs could carry him down the hallway, taking random turns in whichever direction he felt the most pulled to.

Samson continued to follow him, but at some point he grabbed Asher’s shoulder to stop him from rounding another corner.

“Shh, stop.” Samson muttered quickly. Asher froze and listened- he could hear voices around the corner. *Theodore* was there- speaking with who he assumed were a few of the guards.

He turned to Samson, his eyes widening. He needed to get away from Samson if Theodore was there- he could already see the internal battle going on inside Samson's head. But he didn’t know what to do- Samson seemed determined not to leave Asher alone, but Asher wasn’t done here yet- he felt like Calypso was *right there* . Maybe Theodore had found him…

But Asher took too long to make up his mind- Samson stiffened and suddenly grabbed both of Asher’s shoulders in a painfully tight grip.

“Theodore!” Samson shouted, and Asher’s eyes widened. It was a fucking *trap* - of course it was. He frantically tried to pull away from Samson, but he wasn’t letting go.
Samson shoved Asher the rest of the way around the corner, well within sight of Theodore and three armed guards- though they were all the way at the other end of the hall. They didn’t look like the regular security guards- they looked like unmarked FBI agents. Full bullet proof body armor and everything.

“Well well well, what’s going on over here~?” Theodore hummed, turning to watch them.

“I- I got him, Theodore-!” Samson’s voice sounded unhinged as he grinned, holding a still struggling Asher out towards Theodore. Theodore grinned, gesturing for one of the guards to hand something to him. Asher froze- he needed to get the *fuck* out of here.

But before he could even move, a guard placed a small, circular object into Theodore’s hand. He watched in horror as Theodore pulled a pin

from what he quickly recognized to be some sort of bomb.

“Sam- Samson, we need to go- *please* -” Asher’s voice was frantic. Everything was moving in slow motion as Theodore drew back his arm to throw the device, and at the same time Samson let go of Asher.

Asher spun around to face Samson, his mind working at a million miles an hour as he heard the unmistakable *clink* of that bomb hitting the floor behind him. He wouldn’t have enough time to dive into the hall- he and Samson were going to die here.

… Or not.

Springing forwards, Asher wrapped his wings around Samson and turned their bodies to the side. His vision was clouded with the bright light of an explosion- it was louder than any gunshot he’d ever heard, and it was so *bright* .

He was instantly engulfed in pain, and the next thing he remembered was looking up at the ceiling, his vision spotty and his mind fuzzy. It was hard to breathe, and he couldn’t feel anything but this all-consuming *misery* .

Groaning, he rolled onto his side to see Samson, lying beside him and watching him with wide eyes. He didn’t seem to be in nearly as much pain as Asher.

“Asher…” Samson whispered. He was reaching out for Asher- who instantly recoiled away, attempting to tuck his wings in closer. An even more intense pain shot through him- through his *spine* .

Oh god, he *really* hoped he didn’t break his fucking back- but the fact that he could move at all was a good sign, at least.

He opened his mouth to speak, but just as he did he watched Samson’s eyes widen as he lunged towards Asher. Asher let out a pained yell as Samson landed heavily on top of him, sending a fiery agony coursing through him.

At that very second, yet another gunshot rang out. He felt a warmth against his side- had he just been shot? No- he was in pain all over, but it wasn’t centralized enough in the area he felt the warmth.

It was Samson- Samson had covered him, and he’d gotten shot, and his blood was pouring onto Asher’s skin. That had never felt so

sickening before.

Asher tried to lift Samson up off of himself, only to feel absolute *agony* as something yanked him up from underneath Samson by his *wing* .

“What the fuck did you do?!” Theodore demanded- his voice sounded so fuzzy and far away.

Asher turned and tried to focus on him, but his vision was doubled and everything *hurt* . Theodore grabbed onto his other wing and *yanked* it hard to the side.

“FUCK! St-stop!” He screamed, trying to thrash away, which only sent blinding white misery through him with every movement putting more pressure on fragile bones.

“You little *bitch* .” Theodore hissed, pulled on Asher’s wing until it *snapped* , the sound ringing out against the cold white walls, now painted with blood and soot.

He cried out again, desperately trying to pull away from the torment. It fucking *burned* . He’d broken bones before, but even then it was nothing like this. One of the sensitive bones in his wing was just snapped in two- he could feel bile rising up his throat as Theodore dropped him onto the cold, painful ground.

A sob tore through Asher’s throat, and it seemed like Theodore was going to say something else, but just then Daniel turned into the hallway at the opposite end. He likely hadn’t heard any of what just happened- only the explosion and gunshot.

“Help- pl-... please, help me- shit-” Asher whispered, his voice growing weaker as he unwillingly went limp, his vision going black as the pain thoroughly overwhelmed him- rendering him unconscious once again.

The next time that Asher came to, he really wished he hadn’t.

He would’ve hoped that the pain could have died down by now, but all he could think about was how much everything *hurt* .

He tried to speak, to call out for someone- *anyone* . He must’ve made some sort of noise, but he had no clue what it was- someone appeared over him.

He didn't recognize them- he was already squinting against the harsh light, and the person was apparently wearing white because it looked like they were fucking *glowing* .

There was a sort of soft rumbling in the air like someone was speaking, but Asher couldn't focus well enough to hear what they were saying.

All he knew was that a moment later, something cold entered his arm and within *seconds* he was relieved of his mind-numbing pain. It just stopped- the sigh he let out was the last thing he heard as he slipped under again.

He went through a very similar process a few more times- it started getting hard to keep track. But finally one time when he woke up, it wasn't because he was in pain- he was just *waking up* .

It was still bright, and his vision was odd- he couldn't figure out why. As he sat up and looked around, his eyes locked onto Vesper, who had been sitting on a chair in the corner of the room.

As soon as Asher moved, Vesper launched himself out of the chair and stood before Asher, a look of panic on his face.

"Asher, be careful. You need to lay back down-" Vesper insisted, gently urging Asher to lay back down.

"Where- where are we?" He rasped- his voice sounded even worse than it had after the fire. He wasn't sure how Vesper had even understood what he was saying, but somehow he had.

"In a hospital, sort of… As it turns out, when Daniel said they brought Chardy to a hospital, they meant a very specific government-run place where we can actually tell people the classified ways we've been injured." Vesper explained softly as he propped Asher up on a few pillows so he was basically sitting up.

As his senses returned to him, he felt discomfort from multiple areas feeling restrained. For one, his right arm had several tubes running through it and he had different heart and brain monitors on- he shuddered as it all reminded him of the way those things Burton attached to him felt. But he could keep himself relaxed as long as Vesper was here with him- he knew Vesper wouldn't let anyone hurt him.

His entire back and wings felt uncomfortable as well, but he couldn't

seem to stretch his wings out to see them. Then that horrible *snap* sound echoed through his mind again, and he felt himself go pale.

“Vesper- Vesper my- my wings- are they okay?” He asked quickly, his voice becoming worried.

Vesper’s expression saddened, and Asher felt himself begin to panic. And of course just then was when someone had to walk into the room.

Asher turned his gaze over to see Daniel and Lance both walk in, looking concerned.

“Hello Asher, the doctor let us know you were awake-” Daniel spoke softly. That means there must’ve been a different room where someone was monitoring his heart and brain activity, which he didn’t like the idea of.

“Daniel, I thought I had requested to speak to Asher alone when he first woke up.” Vesper spoke in a very firm, cold tone as he made direct eye contact with Daniel, who returned an odd look to Vesper.

“I know, but after our disagreement–” Daniel started, but Lance’s wings flared up as he spoke over him, but was talking to Vesper.

“You don’t get to be the sole person to decide what’s best for Asher.” He snapped.

“... What do you mean? What’s going on?” Asher asked, his voice sounding so fucking weak he wanted to claw out his vocal cords.

“I think we should talk about this outside, you two-” Daniel spoke in a low, insistent voice, completely ignoring Asher, who panicked a little at the thought of Vesper leaving him alone here.

“I agree, because I need to talk to my brother without *you* around.” Lance muttered, pressing his pointed finger against Vesper’s chest.

Vesper glared back down at Lance, crossing his arms as he stood his ground and refused to back away, even as Lance’s wings undoubtedly grew uncomfortably hot. Asher had had enough fire for his lifetime, even if most of it was all just in his own head.

“I am not going anywhere. I was not initially going to tell Asher that you two wanted to lie to him, but now I believe he deserves to know. Just like he deserves to know the whole truth.” Vesper grumbled. He

didn't need to explain any more, because Asher understood what he was saying. By telling Asher that there were things that *could* be withheld, he was ensuring that Asher wouldn't stop demanding the truth.

He had Daniel and Lance backed into a corner, and Asher was impressed.

"No! Why the fuck would you- damnit-!" Lance hissed through gritted teeth. Daniel set a hand on Lance's shoulder, trying to mediate still.

"Vesper, please- don't make me talk about Asher as if he isn't in the room with us." Daniel's voice was quiet, but still quite firm.

"Then don't. I'm telling him exactly what happened, because he is freaking out and it's only going to get worse the longer this goes on. Spare yourself some of his trust and let me do it without any further pushback." Vesper kept his tone steady and even.

There was a long silence before Daniel sighed.

"Fine then, but I'm going to be right outside. Lance-" Daniel's tone had softened as he shot Asher an apologetic stare. Lance still looked like he wanted to argue, but he followed Daniel out of the room regardless, still visibly seething.

Before Asher even had time to ask, Vesper pulled his chair up close to Asher's bed and sat down, gently grabbing Asher's hand.

It was strange, but the longer that Asher was awake and focused, the more he felt this *hole* in his chest, like something was missing. He started to panic slightly as he thought it might be his wings- Vesper had described the feeling of losing them as being like losing a part of himself.

"Alright stardust, I'm going to tell you a lot of very serious things that have happened. If you want to pause for a minute, or if you have any questions, just let me know-" Vesper whispered, curling a tentacle around Asher's arm.

"Okay…?" Asher just watched him with wide eyes.

"Your wings are *badly* damaged- the left one is broken right around the middle of your wings humerus, one of the biggest bones. It's been set back in place, but it's hard to properly cast it, so it's just wrapped up tightly and you *have* to do your best not to move it. It may need

physical therapy, and there just isn't enough research to know if it'll be the same after or not, but it- it's not looking good…" Vesper whispered. Asher's hands shook as he nodded a little, nervous that if he spoke he'd start crying.

He was already starting to feel trapped in this place, not knowing if or how he'd be able to leave.

"Your other wing-... it took the brunt of a very big explosion, do you remember the hand-held bomb Theodore threw?" Vesper asked softly, and Asher nodded again. "It was incredibly powerful, and it tore your wing in several areas. It's going to be badly scarred, but overall that one is looking in better shape than your left one…"

"Okay…" Asher's voice shook. There was so much he wanted to say, but more than he wanted to speak, he wanted Vesper to finish telling him everything he needed to know.

"Amelia… They never found her body. The building collapsed shortly after everyone got out- no one is sure exactly what happened to her, but some time in the next week there will be a ceremony for her, exactly like what a funeral would have been." Vesper wrapped several more tentacles around Asher's arms and torso in a comforting manner, which he was grateful for.

Amelia didn't deserve to die- the thought alone felt like something was stabbing him in the chest. She didn't fucking deserve it- it wasn't *fair* .

"Do you need to take a break..?" Vesper asked softly.

"No- no I-... please just… just tell me everything now-" Asker replied quietly, and Vesper nodded a bit.

"Samson-... I'm sure you remember, but he was shot right after the bomb went off. He-... I never truly trusted him, but it truly seemed like he was trying to help…" Vesper had an odd hint of grief in his tone. Perhaps something had happened between Samson and Vesper, something that changed how Vesper thought of Samson.

Images flooded back into Asher's mind and he found himself jolting up, a surge of panic rushing through his veins.

"He- he saved me- oh god, he died?? That- that bullet was meant for me- we were-... where's Calypso??" He began panicking, his mind racing almost as quick as his heartbeat as Vesper tightened his grip.

“Shh, Asher- please let me finish explaining…” Vesper spoke softly. Forcing himself not to jump up and run out right now, Asher locked his eyes back onto Vesper’s in an attempt to calm himself down.

“I hadn’t even realized that Calypso was with you when you entered the building, because she was nowhere to be seen at that point. I thought they might have been hidden somewhere- but when Daniel and Lance found him and you after the explosion-... Theodore said he had found him, under some of the rubble… Calypso is dead. I’m so sorry…” Vesper whispered, and Asher felt his world crumble a little.

That hole in his chest grew, it consumed him as a powerful wave of loneliness crashed over him. He had heard horror stories of what happened to people whose spirit animals died, hell- Vesper was even one of the people it had happened to, but he never considered that it would happen to *his Calypso* .

His grief was immeasurable, he felt like he was being shredded from the inside out. He just wanted to close his eyes and never open them again- maybe if he did that, he’d find Calypso in whatever afterlife awaited him.

He could never do that to Vesper, but it *hurt* . It hurt like a raw, tender wound over his entire chest. Every movement, every thought, *everything* only served to deepen that hurt. This was so different to losing his mother, when he hardly understood death. Now he understood, now it truly hurt.

He understood that Calypso had died- alone, scared- they *never* should have died. They never should have been there, and Asher would live with the regret of bringing his little dragon with him for the rest of his empty, miserable life.

No, not entirely empty. He had Vesper. And once all this blew over, he’d have Lance- and Chardy, and Daniel. But he wouldn’t have Amelia. He wouldn’t have Calypso. And that was just *wrong* .

“No- no, are- are you sure..?” His voice came out sounding strangled. “She- she could just be- I- I don’t know-...”

“I know exactly what you’re thinking, but she’s gone… I’m so sorry my love…” Vesper continued to whisper as he ran a hand through Asher’s hair.

This wasn’t fucking *fair* .

Calypso shouldn't have died, Amelia shouldn't have died- even *Samson* shouldn't have died. The grief weighed so heavily on him- and there was exactly one person he could pin all of that pain onto.

"She's gone…" His voice cracked as he repeated Vesper's words, trying to accept it. To begin coping. He couldn't just give up- not like he did when he was grieving his mom. He wasn't going to stand for this- but first, he needed to know exactly what the hell happened to Theodore.

"Please, take a breath, stardust… I know you want to hurt him, and whatever plan you have after this I *fully* support you on, but you need to let me help you first… and right now what you need is to *breathe* …" Vesper gently rubbed Asher's back as Asher nodded, forcing a few deep breaths in and out.

"Do you promise..?" Asher whispered, and Vesper nodded.

" *Please* , let me help you… I want revenge just as badly as you do." Vesper's voice grew darker.

"Okay… I will- but what- where is Theodore..?" Asher asked quietly, and Vesper sighed.

"I assume he isn't the only person you want to know about, so you should know that Dexter was successfully saved. He's being held in a room made of special materials, because he can't control the new power that his ability now holds. He is alive, and Lance is viciously defending him-... I think it's because of Dexter's power. I was able to learn a significant amount- Dexter used his ability to manipulate you and Lance, but you were able to break away long enough for the effect to wear off. It was subtle enough to not trigger as anything more than him being a normal manipulator." Vesper spoke softly, and Asher nodded along.

"It makes sense… the more I think about it, the more it all starts to connect-" Asher murmured. His pain was still so *raw* , but it almost became easier to handle when he gave himself something else to focus on.

"Yeah… well, as for Theodore- he got out relatively uninjured, some bruises and a fractured arm. He won't talk to anyone but Chardy about what happened." Vesper finished.

"... we need to kill him." Asher muttered.

"I agree. First we need to get all of these wires off of you- I don't like

the idea of them watching you.” Vesper muttered.
“Me neither-” Asher spat, glancing at his arm and cringing a little.

With Vesper’s help, they were able to get all of those tubes and wires off of Asher. Vesper had brought a change of clothes for Asher, which he was seriously appreciating right now since he certainly didn’t want to go running around killing everyone in a hospital gown. After changing, Vesper had Asher sit on the bed again.

“I don’t think we should do anything right now, we need a decent plan first.” Vesper said softly, and Asher agreed.

With the weight of the souls of those who died weighing him down, he didn’t *want* to wait- but he knew it was for the better. And now he had Vesper with him- they could talk, and figure out a good plan.

Or at least he thought they could, until the door to the room was once again pushed open.

Chapter End Notes

> Triggers include but are not limited to: Human experimentation, guns/gun violence, explosives/bombs, hallucinations, death, grief, confusion, drugs/mentions of being high but like just pain medications, broken bones

And sometimes, it ends just the same.

Chapter Summary

> Matching beginning and ending chapter titles anyone??
> General triggers for just everything atp, and apologies in advanced you guys. I really tried to make this chapter the absolute best but tbh I just didn't love it as much as I wanted to :/
> So strap in and good luck, and please bear with my still horrible descriptions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Daniel stepped back into the room, looking beyond tired now. His shoulders were slumped, and he just looked defeated.

“How’s it going?” Daniel asked softly, turning to Vesper.

“Fine. I told Asher just about everything he needs to know.” Vesper replied, stepping defensively between Daniel and Asher.

Asher had lived with Daniel and the others for so long now, he had trusted Daniel especially for almost that entire time. He eventually ran out of reasons *not* to trust Daniel- but now, Vesper was distrustful.

The first night they had brought Vesper home, he seemed to trust Daniel well enough. And for months Vesper never questioned Daniel, never seemed particularly distrustful- but now Vesper was challenging every decision, every action that Daniel took.

Vesper didn’t trust Daniel.

That was reason enough for Asher to follow his lead- if Vesper didn’t trust Daniel, it was for a reason. And Asher trusted Vesper- he trusted his reasons to not trust someone.

Daniel narrowed his eyes a bit, glancing at Asher from around Vesper. Asher looked at the ground, his feelings torn. He *wanted* to trust Daniel, but he trusted Vesper so much more, after everything.

“Vesper, you know his hospital stay isn’t over, right? They’re going to

want him to change back into the gown, and we need to get him hooked back up to the machines-" Daniel spoke in a gentle tone, taking a small step forwards.

It didn't sound right. He must've been hanging around or talking with Theodore recently.

"He doesn't need them. He's awake now, he can eat his own food and drink his own water. He isn't critical, so he doesn't need those monitors." Vesper replied firmly.

"The doctors would disagree- he could start slipping and get worse-" Daniel insisted, sounding worried.

It felt like Asher's heart was being physically squeezed- a mix of deep sorrow and horrible longing swirling in his chest. He wanted Daniel to *leave* - listening to him talk while trying to actively rewire his brain to stop trusting Daniel was *too fucking hard* .

"Those devices are the same as the ones Burton had." Vesper responded simply, not needing to elaborate any further.

"I understand that, but–" Daniel started.

"There is no 'but'." Vesper cut him off, standing up rather quickly. Asher couldn't *feel* whatever emotions Vesper was pushing into the room, but he knew that Daniel was certainly feeling them, and beginning to look quite nervous.

"Vesper, please don't make me force this." Daniel's voice was suddenly darker now- it sounded almost like when Asher had mentioned Theodore on the rooftop all those lifetimes ago. It felt like it could've been decades since that day, but by Asher's count it was only a few days ago.

It was startling, and his words only made a pit of fear develop in Asher's stomach. He should've never trusted Daniel from the beginning.

"... What do you mean?" Asher whispered- he could feel anger radiating off of Vesper as he sprawled out his tentacles, taking up so much of the room with just his presence.

Maybe he was imagining it, but he could swear the lights even dimmed under Vesper's hold on the air around them. A flicker of fear crossed Daniel's expression, likely from Vesper's power- but Daniel did

a good job hiding its effect on him.

“Get out.” Vesper spoke in a firm voice that seemed to echo off the walls of the increasingly smaller space.

Asher could hear Daniel sigh, but he wasn’t watching Daniel now- now he was staring at the ground, clutching the loose fabric of the hem of his sweater.

God, he wished Calypso was here with him.

Daniel must have done something, because a second later the door burst open with such an aggression that Asher jumped, stumbling to his feet and whipping his head to face the door.

Daniel stepped to the side as several guards filed into the room- they each had on a full body suit of armor, and it looked almost *identical* to the armor that the guards were wearing at the lab.

There were five in total, and all five instantly approached Vesper with their fucking *weapons* drawn. And even with that imminent threat, Vesper still had the thought to curl a few of his tentacles around Asher to keep him standing.

Even in this moment, Vesper was still paying enough attention to Asher to notice that he was barely keeping himself standing.

Asher had never seen the full extent of Vesper’s power before- he never had a reason to use it for anything other than swaying the mood of a room. He wasn’t even sure if Vesper knew the full extent of his own powers- but now he had a reason to find out.

The air in the room shifted, and in a second all five guards hit the floor. Some of them were wailing, clutching their heads as if they were in pain.

Asher watched idly as their bodies writhed around on the floor, pushing back away from Vesper who was just watching them with a cold expression. He didn’t even seem *tired* .

“Vesper- what are you doing?? Stop!” Daniel sounded slightly panicked as he took a step towards Vesper.

“Don’t move.” Vesper snapped, his voice was so *loud* and commanding- Daniel froze in place, likely startled- or maybe even stuck because of Vesper’s power. “Asher-” Vesper looked back at

Asher, who nodded in understanding.

They needed to get the fuck out of here.

Vesper hadn't let up his mental attack on any of the guards- upon closer inspection, Asher assumed he was pushing *fear* into their minds- they all looked petrified, some of them were crying and quietly pleading.

When Asher listened to the words, they were pleading for *something* to stop, to leave them alone.

Asher knelt down next to one of them, watching as they recoiled away in fear. It was a younger man- Asher tried not to look in his eyes for too long so he didn't feel bad about what was happening.

He grabbed the gun off of the man's belt, standing up to see Daniel still frozen in place, and Vesper standing beside Asher.

Daniel must've been experiencing something similar, but less intense than everyone else in the room, judging by the horrified look on his face. It almost hurt to see him that way, but after this it was easier to disconnect this person before him from Daniel, someone he could've almost called his dad. It was never something he dared to actually think too deeply about, but in this moment it only added to the mountains of grief ripping him to shreds.

"Let's go." Asher whispered, shaking his head slightly to clear it, and Vesper nodded. They both ran off, slamming the door shut behind themselves.

Flying down the hall, Asher looked from side to side at all the doors they passed. It all seemed like a very stereotypical hospital, but it was just eerily empty compared to a real, normal hospital.

He might've been imagining it, but he could swear there were footsteps a few halls away, running towards them. He was still disoriented, but Vesper seemed to be sending some sort of energy out into the air- not exactly calming, but not anxiety-inducing either. He wasn't in much pain, still probably being slightly high off of whatever pain meds he had been on.

Once he saw the door he was looking for, he froze and swung open the brown oak door. It looked a little different than the rest of them, so he was sure it was a janitor's room, and he was right.

Quickly slipping inside, Vesper followed him with a slightly confused expression as Asher shut the door.

“What are we doing?” Vesper asked quietly.

“I’m not gonna shoot that asshole, I’m gonna poison him.” Asher hissed, looking around through the cleaning supplies until he found a small enough bottle of bleach that he could carry it with him.

“Wait, there’s someone outside.” Vesper whispered when Asher turned back to the door. Asher nodded a bit and pressed his ear against the door, listening as several pairs of footsteps ran through the area, then faded off.

Once he was sure they were alone again, they left and quickly headed to Dexter’s room. Luckily Vesper knew where it was, and it was on the same floor they were on, so it only took them minutes to get there.

Pushing inside, they stepped into a very dark room. Vesper used one of his tentacles to flick on the light- it was very similar to Asher’s room, but Dexter was in bed completely unconscious. Well- he had been, until the light was turned on and he began to shift a little.

Moving quickly, Asher grabbed one of the tubes that was connected to Dexter’s arm- the one steadily dripping water into his bloodstream. Following it up to the bag, he opened up the top and dumped out what little water had remained.

He hardly hesitated as Vesper passed him the now open bottle of bleach- having apparently grabbed it and opened it for Asher. He then poured it right into the bag until it was nearly full, and then he hung it right back up where it had been before- the bleach looked just like water, and the smell of the cleaner wasn’t out of the ordinary for the hospital.

Then he slid the bottle down under Dexter’s bed to hide it, glancing over at Vesper as he hesitated a second.

“Can you restrain him before I wake him up?” Asher asked quietly.

“I can, but why do you need to wake him?” Vesper replied with concern and a bit of confusion.

“I have something I want to say to him before we leave, but it’ll have to be fast before he remembers that he can make us hallucinate. So just make sure you don’t do anything that seems life-threatening to

him-" Asher muttered back.

Vesper nodded once, then stepped closer to Dexter's bed. All at once, Vesper extended all of his tentacles and firmly coiled them around Dexter's limbs, keeping him firmly pinned against the small mattress with his arms beside his head and his legs stretched out to the other end of the bed.

Already Dexter was beginning to wake up, but Asher quickly approached and leaned down so he was right in Dexter's face. It brought up bad memories, being this close to him. It made his skin crawl.

"Dexter!" He shouted, sudden enough that it even momentarily startled Vesper.

Dexter jerked awake, his eyes going wide as he instinctively tried to thrash around or sit up, but he was held completely still.

"Alright now you listen here, and you listen good you son of a bitch." Asher hissed, grabbing on to Dexter's hair to keep his head still. Asher's hair had been grabbed or pulled before as a method of painful control, and it had always been more than uncomfortable and painful- it was oddly empowering to be the one inflicting that hurt now.

"Jesus- fuck- Asher??" Dexter's eyes were wide- he looked panicked as he stared up at Asher, though his tense muscles relaxed slightly.

"I fucking *hate* you. You are one of the worst people I have ever met, and I truly hope you rot in hell for the rest of your miserable existence. I wish I had told Lance the things you did when I had the chance, but I didn't. So I'm doing this instead." Asher spoke in a low, threatening tone. Dexter began to struggle again as he started to panic a little more.

"Wh-what-? Doing what??" Dexter demanded. He didn't seem so powerful or scary now, he seemed *weak* .

"Goodnight, Dex." Asher smirked as he turned and walked away from the bed. Crossing the room, he opened the door and nodded for Vesper to follow.

Vesper released Dexter and quickly followed Asher out of the room, both of them continuing silently down the hallway and around a corner to make sure Dexter couldn't follow them.

“Are you sure that will kill him before anyone has time to figure it out?” Vesper asked quietly.

“If someone goes to check on him I’m sure they’ll know something is wrong within minutes, but I doubt anyone would think it’s bleach in his water before it’s too late to do anything about it-” Asher replied. “Do you know where Theodore’s room is?”

“Yes, everyone is all on this same floor. They spread everyone out by a hallway or two, for some reason.” Vesper muttered as he took the lead.

Getting to Theodore’s room was disappointing, to say the least. He wasn’t in his room- and apparently Chardy’s room was nearby, but the door was open and after walking by they saw that it was empty as well.

On a hunch, Asher suggested finding their way to the roof- it wouldn’t be hard, seeing as they were on the very top floor of the building and would just need to get to the staircase.

Vesper didn’t spend enough time here away from Asher to know the whole layout though, so it took a good bit of sneaking around to avoid the security guards, who were still searching for them- and of course a few lucky guesses helped to find the stairwell up onto the roof.

When Asher pushed open the door and stepped out onto the concrete, he was blasted by a rather strong gust of cold wind. The sky wasn’t stormy as it had been before, but it was still all gray and cloudy, with the soft scent of rain but none of the droplets falling from the sky just yet.

The wind was a little harsh, but not constant. It created a nice background noise, so Asher couldn’t hear his own shaky breathing or pounding heartbeat.

Damn, they were *high* up. About as tall as Daniel’s building, if he had to guess. He shuddered to think of what it would be like to fall from here, wondering briefly if his broken and battered wings would be able to save him from a fall like that.

There was an actual railing around this roof though, and he was sure Vesper would catch him if he ever got close enough and slipped.

And unfortunately it looked like he’d *have* to get close to the edge, since that was exactly where Theodore and Chardy happened to be

standing, seemingly just talking.

“Shit.” Asher muttered, instantly feeling a surge of frustration. Unlike with Dexter, Asher didn’t care for prolonging Theodore’s death. He just wanted to shoot him and be rid of him, but now the gun felt heavy in his pocket, and his mind went blank as he tried to figure out what he could possibly say to Chardy.

Vesper hung back, staying near the door as Asher approached the other two people out on the roof.

“Chardy?” He forced his voice to be louder than the wind, trying not to let it shake. He hadn’t felt anything after killing Dexter, and he was certain he wouldn’t feel anything after killing Theodore- at least, until now he was. Now he was nearly overwhelmed with this gut-churning guilt, and he didn’t understand why.

Chardy spun around, looking at Asher with wide eyes. He looked slightly stunned as he quickly walked to Asher, closing the distance between the two of them. He looked like he was going to hug Asher, but stopped before he actually did- he was probably worried about hurting Asher. It felt nice to know that Chardy was at least slightly more predictable again.

Glancing at Theodore, he was met with a very pissed off glare directed at Asher. He just quickly looked away from Theodore and back at Chardy.

“Oh my god, Asher! You’re okay- what- what are you doing up here? Daniel said you were on bedrest for at least another few days-” Chardy’s voice was high pitched with worry.

“I uh- I felt fine, and there’s something I need to do- Chardy- you trust me, right?” Asher asked quickly, trying to keep his voice low enough so that Theodore couldn’t hear him.

“... What? I mean, yes I- I do but- what’s going on?” Chardy asked, sounding even more confused and worried now.

Despite Theodore’s presence, he seemed to be acting oddly normally. It seemed like whenever anyone was feeling any particularly strong feelings, Theodore’s ability didn’t affect them as much.

And then something clicked in Asher’s head, like a lightbulb going off.

Theodore hadn't been *brainwashing* anyone, he was changing how they were *perceiving* things. It made complete sense the more he thought about it- that's why everyone had seemed to be so annoyed at Asher, because Theodore was *making* them perceive his actions as annoying.

It must have a much stronger grip when someone has been exposed to it for long periods of time, just like Dexter's power. That was why Samson acted so strangely, he had been exposed to Theodore's power for *years* to the point that Theodore probably *could* brainwash and control him.

Oh god, Samson. Another wash of guilt crashed over him- he had been the reason for the deaths of so many, and he hated it.

"I need you to go stand by Vesper, okay?" Asher spoke with a bit of urgency, snapping himself out of his momentary daze. He didn't even realize he had been using his ability until the fatigue hit- he needed to remember to make sure he didn't use it anymore, he was still too weak to use it for long and he couldn't stop to rest now.

He wanted to ask Theodore about his power before killing him, just to know for sure if he was right- but really, he didn't care that much. He could surely find the answer from another source once all of this was over anyway.

"O-okay- why? Asher, what's happening?" Chardy asked, taking a small step to get around Asher and move closer to Vesper. Asher side-stepped so that Chardy wouldn't accidentally touch him- actively focusing on not using his power right now meant that he'd have absolutely zero control over what Chardy saw, and it would more than likely be something relating to killing Theodore, or killing Dexter.

"Something that should've happened a long time ago. It's all going to be okay, I promise-" Asher forced a small smile as Chardy's worry only grew, showing clearly in his expression. His furrowed eyebrows, the way his lips tugged into a slight frown.

He really hoped Chardy would forgive him.

As soon as Chardy was out of the way, Asher turned back to Theodore, who obviously knew that something was up now.

Asher reached into his pocket and pulled out his gun. It was like everything was moving in slow motion as he switched the safety off, and cocked the gun while lifting it up in a smooth, practiced motion.

Killing someone had never felt like this before. He was sweating despite the cold, and shaking so badly that he was worried he might miss the first shot, especially with all the wind. He tried to shuffle his wings to release some of the tension in his shoulders, but the sharp sting that shot through his back was a harsh reminder of why he was doing this to begin with.

“Asher what the hell are you doing??” Chardy screamed from behind him, but his voice wasn’t getting any closer. Vesper must be physically stopping Chardy from approaching.

His finger hovered over the trigger, and he took a deep breath as he aimed right for the center of Theodore’s chest- he figured it would be an easier place to shoot than Theodore’s head.

Theodore’s eyes widened as he took a quick step to the side, but Asher followed him with the gun, his eyes fixed firmly on his target. He was just about to pull the trigger when *something* hit him hard in the side, sending him flying a few feet to the left and tumbling onto the cold concrete. From the sudden movement, his finger squeezed the trigger of the gun and sent a loose shot flying into the air, momentarily deafening him as the gun flew from his hands and clattered down somewhere out of sight from Asher.

His vision was blurry as he forced himself to sit up- but something wasn’t right. He felt *hot* - not like when he was chilly and sweating before, but instead he was actually *hot* .

More than hot- it was uncomfortable, almost painful- and when he turned to see what had hit him, he saw why. Lance was standing over Asher with a bewildered and slightly angry expression.

“Asher! What the *fuck* ??” Lance demanded. His voice was loud, louder than Asher had ever heard him yell normally- and it had this odd sort of crackling effect like the sounds of a fire when it got too large. His wings were almost white from how hot they were burning- they had probably burned Asher, and whatever pain medications and adrenaline were still in his system had simply offset the brunt of the pain.

“Lance-! I- you need to go-” Asher scrambled backwards, trying to reach for his gun only to see that Theodore had grabbed it and was now quickly moving to stand behind Lance.

Vesper had been holding Chardy still with several tentacles- Asher could see him now, standing by the door of the roof. He looked

slightly disfigured because of the hot, wavy air around Lance's wings that Asher had to look through to see Vesper.

Now, Vesper let go of Chardy and quickly approached Lance. Vesper reached one of his tentacles out to wrap around Lance's torso, and at the same time the door to the roof was pushed open. Asher looked away from Vesper just to see Daniel run out onto the roof and quickly survey the area. His eyes locked onto Lance and Vesper, and then widened.
"Lance! Stop-!" Daniel shouted. Asher dragged his vision back to Lance and Vesper as well, only to realize with horror that Lance had managed to grab onto Vesper and wrap those dangerously hot wings around Vesper, who was struggling to get away from the heat without much success. Vesper had coiled all of his tentacles around Lance's limbs, desperately tugging at him to try to get Lance off, but it was clear the heat was making Vesper unable to think or act clearly.

Lance looked back at Daniel, but he didn't let go of Vesper. He wasn't directly touching Vesper with his wings, but they were more than close enough to be painful for Vesper regardless- Vesper was still just frantically attempting to get Lance *off* of his melting skin and flesh.

Without thinking, Asher lunged forwards towards Theodore. He grabbed the gun forcibly from the stunned bat- who was seemingly too startled to put up much of a fight, as if he'd forgotten the danger Asher possessed when holding this gun.

Asher had no time to think through what he was doing, his body was moving and he was watching helplessly as if it were on a screen before him.

He stood right next to Daniel and swiftly lifted the gun, holding it directly to the man's head, watching as he stiffened and held completely still.

"Lance!" Asher shouted to get his brother's attention. Lance snapped his head around and visibly froze as he saw what was happening. "Let Vesper go."

Instantly, Lance dropped Vesper and took a step back. Vesper collapsed to the ground, covered in countless burns ranging in severity, with the worst ones having melted away some portions of Vesper's flesh. It made Asher want to throw up- he knew how much that hurt, and he *hated* that Vesper had to go through that pain and Asher couldn't do *anything* .

But he was just about to pull the gun away, when he saw a flash of bright yellowish light in the corner of his vision.

He didn't even have time to turn and see what it was before he watched as a large flaming object propelled directly into Vesper's chest. Vesper shouted in surprise and likely pain, then instantly went limp.

"No!" The shout tore through Asher's throat so suddenly he hadn't even realized he was the one who said it. Just then when he was distracted, Daniel turned and grabbed on to Asher, wrapping one arm around his chest and using the other to grab the wrist holding the gun.

It was too fast, everything was moving too fast. He didn't even get to see what the hell had hit Vesper, because it was all so *fast* .

Asher's mind was racing as tears welled in his eyes. *Vesper is dead* . It was the one thought echoing around in his mind. *Because of you.* He tried to reason with himself, telling himself that Vesper was just hurt and unconscious. But he knew. He knew Vesper was gone, because Asher could no longer feel his presence. Vesper- *his* Vesper was *gone* .

Hardly thinking now, he fought to keep the gun in his hands just long enough to point it at Theodore, who had his back turned to Asher and was seemingly trying to comfort Chardy, who was curled up and crouched down near the door, seemingly having trouble breathing.

"Asher- stop-" Daniel hissed in Asher's ear, but it was too late. The second that Asher had aimed the gun, he pulled the trigger, his ears ringing as Theodore dropped to the ground, the bullet having gone straight through his back, right below where his wings connected to his back.

He let Daniel yank the gun away from him after that, and he allowed his body to go limp as grief once again took over his head, forcing out everything else. All logic, all reasoning, everything was gone but that overwhelming pit in his stomach.

His body ached, and it felt like his heart was being ripped from his chest. He was being gutted alive. He should have left Vesper inside for this- he should have left Calypso with Melinda.

He should have *known better* .

He sank to the floor as Daniel put him down and rushed to Theodore's

side. There was one person in the world who had always chosen Asher first, who would never leave his side to be by someone else's. And that person was lying dead in a crumpled heap just fifteen feet away. *Dead* .

His shoulders shook with a sob as he practically crawled to Vesper's side- there was a massive bleeding wound in his chest now, it looked like someone had shot him with a cannon, and he couldn't stand to look at it for more than a few seconds before he could feel bile rising in the back of his throat again.

His skin was even more pale, his purple eyes had lost their glow and were now dull as they stared lifelessly to the sky. His entire body was limp, his tentacles sprawled out around him- all of them were littered with burns of their own.

Tears streamed down Asher's cheeks as he began carefully moving Vesper's body, not even bothering to look around so he could know exactly *what* killed Vesper still. All the sounds of everyone else rushing around, shouting- whatever they were doing, it was all blocked out by the wind and Asher's own heartbeat, and the soft ringing in his ears. He pulled all of Vesper's tentacles closer to Vesper's body- Vesper did that whenever he was uncomfortable, and he was surely uncomfortable now.

Asher was careful with his burned flesh, he knew how sensitive Vesper's extra appendages were, he didn't want to hurt him.

No . Vesper is *dead* . He can't be hurt. Asher had to keep reminding himself of that. *Dead.*

He sort of just stopped his movements, his hands falling into his lap as he stared down at Vesper, watching as he gradually became more and more unrecognizable.

Surely a day would come in the future that he wouldn't even be able to remember what Vesper looked like, just like how he couldn't remember his mom. That thought clutched tight around his chest, making it hard to breathe.

He shuddered slightly, his breath stuttering with each half formed sob that tore through him. He could tell someone was standing behind him, but he dared not rip his eyes away from his Vesper.

"Asher-... he- he killed Dexter- I'm sorry-" Lance's voice cracked. It was weird, Asher had been surrounded by white noise that kept

everything out, but now that Lance was speaking, his voice cut over everything else as if they were standing alone in a room, with nothing else in the world.

"... what…?" Asher whispered, forcing his gaze up to Lance.

It wasn't *just* Lance though- there was a bird on his shoulder, a phoenix. A bright fiery bird, about the size of an eagle. It was glaring down at Asher- or at least it felt like it was.

Lance wasn't surprised that the bird was there. He'd probably had it for a while- how long had Lance kept that secret, after being so angry at Asher for not telling him about Calypso?

His heart ached at the memory of his little dragon, and another round of grief crashed over him as he tried to keep his vision focused on Lance, but it was so fucking hard to breathe.

"Dexter-... I came in, he was struggling to breathe- he said something about Vesper, and then he-...." Lance trailed off for a second, sounding choked up as tears welled in his eyes. "Then I was flying and I- I saw everyone up here…"

Asher's expression hardened as he shakily stood up, glaring up at Lance. Lance killed Vesper because he *thought* Vesper had killed Dexter, who fucking deserved to die.

" *I* killed Dexter." Asher replied, his voice shaky despite trying to keep it firm. Lance took a small step back, his eyes widening.

"You- wh-what?" Lance's voice was quiet as emotions swirled in those brown eyes that Asher had once found so comforting.

Just a short while ago, Asher had felt so safe from Lance's presence, even if they still argued and had their issues. That was long gone now. He looked at who was supposed to be his brother and didn't fucking *recognize* him.

"Lance, wait-" Daniel's voice startled Asher- at some point, the man had come to stand behind Asher.

Lance reached out and suddenly grabbed Asher by the collar of his shirt, lifting him off the ground slightly. Lance's wings flared out behind him once more, and the phoenix on his shoulder screeched.

Asher just stared up at Lance, his expression cold and dull.

“ *You* killed Dexter?!” Lance demanded, his voice taking on that fiery quality again.

“I would do it again if I had to.” Asher murmured, his voice cracking. Lance spun around and threw Asher to the ground with a nearly deranged shout. Asher wanted to yell, to scream about his pain and his grief as Lance was now. He felt his back slam into the railing behind him, sending spikes of pain through his wings and chest.

“What the *fuck* ! Why- why would you-..?? He was my *friend* -!” Lance screamed, approaching Asher again. The pain in Lance’s voice was almost enough to make Asher regret it for just a second. Almost.

Lance grabbed Asher again, lifting him up by his lower arms. Asher leaned his weight back against the rusty metal railing, trying to get as far away from the heat radiating off of Lance’s wings as possible.

“What the hell is *wrong* with you?!” Lance demanded- he looked so *broken* . Asher wanted to yell, to scream- he wanted to shout and sob and *break down* until he couldn’t feel *anything* . But he didn’t get to do that. He’d have to spend the rest of his life knowing he’d been the reason so many people were grieving, even if the people being grieved for deserved what happened to them.

“I’m sorry…” Asher whispered, but his voice was obscured with the horrible sound of metal creaking. Lance’s wings- they had melted through the railing on either side of Asher.

They both realized this fact far too late as Asher began to tip backwards. But Lance was still holding on to Asher- if he just pulled Asher forwards he wouldn’t fall–

But he didn’t. Lance seemed to hesitate for a moment, then he let go of Asher and took a step back. The look in his eyes was cold, murderous. Calculated. Was that how Asher had looked before he killed?

That look was so *deliberate* . Lance wanted to kill Asher, and when Asher thought about it he couldn’t honestly say that he wanted to stop him.

He fell backwards off the side of the building, wincing as he attempted to spread his wings out to catch himself, acting almost entirely on instinct.

He let out a quiet cry as his wings buckled under the pressure of the

air, certainly shifting his still healing bones as they trailed out around him, far too weak to even attempt again to arch against the air pushing so quickly past him.

Tears gathered in his eyes again as he watched the roof fade away, replaced with the fog of an ever-graying sky. No one would be rushing to save him this time.

He deserved this.

Perhaps it wasn't Lance who had become so unrecognizable, but Asher. All of the brutality of the things that had been done to him, and the things that he did to other people had worn him down into something that could hardly be called a *person* .

It wasn't fair.

He just wanted to curl up in bed with Vesper- and *Calypso* . He wanted to spend time with Amelia or Chardy or even *Lance* and be friends with them. He wanted a family.

But it wasn't them who had ruined that, it was *him* .

He always seemed to be the only person standing in his own way, and now everyone he loved was either dead or wanted him dead.

Cradled by a freezing shroud of air, he plummeted faster and faster towards the ground, falling with the first drops of rain.

It was true what they say about your life flashing before his eyes- so many memories flooded through his mind as his entire body shook with a sob.

He just felt *regret* . He wanted to go back and do things differently, but he couldn't. He was a bad person, and he was going to die for it. He *wanted* to die for it. He should've gone through with killing himself before he could've hurt anyone else like this- he should have let Burton kill him instead of reaching out for help like he had.

His chest ached, his whole body hurt. He just wanted to *rest* .

In the back of his mind, he hoped he'd see his mom again when he died. He hoped he'd see everyone he'd been missing *so fucking much* .

He wasn't sure what afterlife there was waiting for him- he knew if it truly was heaven and hell, he'd have a one-way ticket downward. But

that just never felt right to him.

Maybe there was nothing- maybe he'd just die, and be dead. That didn't feel right either, but it sounded nice. He'd never have to think again, never have to do anything. He couldn't hurt anyone else, and he couldn't *be* hurt.

Memories of Vesper were flashing before him now, and he let himself be *consumed* by them as he closed his eyes. If he focused hard enough, he could pretend he was just talking with Vesper, like it was any normal day. Like Vesper wasn't dead, and like Asher wasn't about to die by his own brother's hand.

It was nice, nice to pretend.

He let out a long breath, and allowed the world to fade out around him for the last time.

The end.

Chapter End Notes

I'M SORRY. I feel like it's important to state that this was actually planned from the beginning, because the prompt that gave me this story idea was relating to the hero becoming the villain and dying for it. Ik Asher wasn't really a "villain" exactly, but I think his kill count says enough honestly.
Also, Daniel, Lance, Chardy, etc. None of them are supposed to be bad people, all of this is from Asher's deranged and messed up and scared perspective, and everyone in this story has done things that are bad, but they all have their reasons for thinking they are doing the right things, we just aren't inside their heads like we are with Asher. I love the dynamic of my characters because even if it's not super obvious, every single one of them has a genuine reason to become the villain or to be so distrustful.
Anyways, it has been amazing posting my first ever story on here, and I definitely hope to post more in the future, which may even include spin-offs of this story, I'm not totally sure yet :D

Epilogue

Chapter Summary

> So, I wasn't originally planning on doing any kind of epilogue chapter because I wanted to leave the ending very open-ended, but I had some little ideas for it, and I was convinced to write them out and post it :D It's a pretty short chapter compared to the other ones tho
> I overall don't love it but don't hate it, I got a little emotional writing it tho because I miss all of the cast that I killed off
> Triggers for bad mental health, guilt, grief, suicidal ideation, fun stuff like that

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Grief, deep and raw. All-consuming *grief* .

The second Lance had stepped back away from that ledge he felt an instantaneous wave of *regret* .

The days, and eventually weeks following didn’t really make it any better.

Lance drifted through life, hardly *feeling* things anymore. He never fully understood when Asher had described this feeling before, but now it consumed his entire being. This gray, bland, *dullness* .

It was horrible, but he couldn’t pull himself out of it like he used to be able to.

As the season slowly began its transition into winter, Lance felt especially cold this year. He had started spending more time with Chardy, who had been going through his own process of grief just as Asher had.

They didn’t need to speak to understand, both of them had been manipulated by someone's powers, and both of them had lost Asher because of it.

Once the truth about Dexter came out, there was so little time in the

hospital to process before everything went to shit.

Learning that he had essentially been under his best friends control for the entire course of their friendship was difficult, and then hearing the few things Vesper would say about Asher and Dexter's relationship was fucking *chilling* .

But he never got the chance to ask his baby brother about it, because he *killed him* .

The guilt weighed him down every second of every fucking day.

Daniel and him tried to talk about it, but it was like he couldn't find the words to explain what he was feeling, and it just ended in him being angry.

He didn't *want* to be mad anymore. His anger killed his brother, his anger pushed people away.

His hands began to shake as his thoughts began to swirl around him.

He was sitting in the living room, just him and Chardy, it was late at night, almost three in the morning. This had become almost routine for them recently, both of them finding it hard to sleep.

They hadn't spoken since Daniel had gone to bed over an hour ago, they didn't need to. But Lance wanted so *badly* for this horrible silence to be filled.

Every second in the quiet felt like a lifetime, but it was starting to feel like it wasn't the silence that was killing him, it was just existing- living- in general.

"... I think I'm going to look through Asher's room tomorrow." Lance's voice croaked.

He had never sounded so *small* before.

"Oh…" Chardy responded, his voice just as dull and quiet. He didn't look at Lance, and Lance was sure it was because all Chardy could think about when he looked at Lance was how Lance had let go of Asher.

He was hardly thinking at that moment, and it was realized later that Theodore's power in his dying moments was messing with everyone's minds. Not to mention Dexter's side effects still deep-rooted in Lance's

brain.

"... I miss them…" Chardy whispered after a moment, sounding choked up.

Chardy had always been so calm, so happy. So bright.

Grief had a way of dulling people, but Lance was certain that Chardy would bounce back. He always did.

"I'm sorry…" Lance muttered, suddenly standing up and quickly walking away before his brain had time to process.

No one had openly voiced thinking this was Lance's fault, but he still blamed himself, and that was almost worse.

He hardly paid attention as his feet carried him down the familiar hall. This place used to feel like home, now it just felt dim, unfeeling, and empty.

He blinked in surprise as he found himself standing outside of the door to Asher's room. No one had gone in there since everything had happened, the door had remained shut and walked past without ever looking at it, like everyone was trying to forget that it was there by not looking at it.

If Lance really forced it, he could almost convince himself that Asher and Vesper were just inside of that room, sitting together like they always had.

Lance didn't like Vesper in the beginning, but he had gradually grown to trust him with his little brother. It was clear that Asher loved Vesper, and he was pretty sure Vesper loved Asher too.

Swallowing the lump that formed in his throat, he twisted the door handle and pushed it open, stepping slowly into the dark room.

The moon was shining softly through the window, the curtains left half open as they always were.

Everything was just as it had been left, the bed all messy and unkempt. The laundry was folded neatly by Vesper, sitting in piles just waiting to be put away.

There was one little motorcycle figurine sitting on the nightstand beside Vesper's unused phone. Lance wondered if Vesper had the

other one with him when he died.

Lance hadn't killed Vesper directly, but he couldn't help but feel responsible for it. Apollo was *Lance's* spirit guide after all, which meant that Apollo's action of killing Vesper was what Lance wanted to do deep down.

The phoenix had left after that day, which felt like a cruel joke, because he was sure that he needed the bird now more than ever.

Crossing the room, he sat on the edge of the bed, feeling like the weight of the world had been settled firmly on his chest, making it hard to breathe.

"I'm sorry…" He whispered again into the dark room, but of course there was no response. He wished he could've said sorry to Asher when he was still alive. Apologize and make up for everything, but he would never get that chance. And it was all his own doing.

He had hoped walking into the room would give him some sort of comfort, some feeling of Asher's presence here maybe. Bring back some of that warmth he had been desperately missing. Some people described it that way, being close to places or things that dead loved ones liked, it was supposed to be therapeutic.

But this place just felt *empty* , and Lance felt just as *alone* as ever.

Asher's soul wasn't here, no one's was, maybe not even Lance's.

Lance wouldn't have considered himself super religious, he never really went to church anymore, but it was nice to think of a heaven waiting for him.

He was sure he wouldn't make it to heaven after what he'd done. He just hoped Asher was there, and happy. He had never taken much time to think that deeply about it before, but he desperately hoped that there wasn't just *nothing* after death.

He felt sick to think that Asher, Amelia, Vesper- all of them, were just *gone* , that there was no part of any of them left anywhere.

He hadn't even noticed the tears beginning to slip down his cheeks until one of the salty little droplets landed on the back of his hand that was resting in his lap. He quickly wiped away the tears, forcing a deep breath in through his nose and out through his mouth.

Lance was once again overcome with that immense ocean of *sorrow* . He had never felt such an *intense* feeling like this before, but over a span of a few fucking days he had lost *everything* .

Francis had quit after that day, Lucinda too. All that was left was Lance, Chardy, Victor, and Daniel.

Lance thought about quitting as well, but he had no life waiting for him anywhere else. Nowhere to go, no one to go with. He hadn't felt this fucking *hopeless* since he moved to the city with Dexter.

God, even the thought of Dexter crushed him under another wave of grief. Part of him understood that Dexter was a bad person who had done bad things, but the other part couldn't get over Dexter being his *best friend* .

Dexter had been there for him through *everything* , and it was hard to accept that most of that was just *manipulation* . That he was forced to think of the man differently in his head, forced to trust him.

Lance shuddered, pushing himself off of the bed. He needed to get out of this room before he spiralled too far again.

He quietly shut the door to the empty room and crossed the hall to get to his own, swiftly locking the door and curling up in bed.

His wings were glowing softly, and he ran his hands over the soft, swirling feathers a few times to attempt to soothe himself.

He wondered if they would still burn Asher, if Asher were still here. *If* had become such a painful word.

Lance must've fallen asleep at some point, because the next thing he knew he was waking up in the morning.

His sleep never felt very restful anymore.

He should change into a clean outfit, but it just sounded so much more effort than it was worth. So he just left the room and headed to the kitchen wearing the same clothes for probably the fourth day in a row.

Victor was there already, making eggs for breakfast. Victor had been very quiet and distant since everything happened, even with Lance.

“Good morning-” Lance mumbled as he went to sit on the couch.

“Hey. Want me to make you some food too?” Victor asked, his voice dry. He didn’t even look over at Lance.

“No, thanks.” Lance muttered his reply, grabbing the remote to turn on whatever came up that wasn’t a news station.

The news was still covering parts of the story with the lab, the people working there, everything that they could. Luckily the government was somehow able to cover up Daniel and everyone's involvement though, so they were all safe still, and there was some crazy elaborate cover story Lance hadn’t bothered to learn the details of.

Perhaps *safe* was a bit too strong of a word to describe their situation, though.

When Victor was done cooking, he came and sat next to Lance to eat. It was the closest contact they had had in a while. But Victor had two plates, and he offered one of them to Lance.

“I’m not hungry-” Lance murmured, but Victor just set the plate in Lance’s lap anyway.

“Chardy’s worried about you. He asked me to make you food-” Victor replied as he began eating, looking away from Lance again. A nagging voice in his mind said surely the only reason no one would look at him was because they too blamed him.

“ *He* should be the one we’re worrying about-” Lance shot back, his voice quiet.

“Yeah, well, oh well.” Victor snapped, catching Lance off guard.

“... Are you alright?” Lance asked after a second. Now Victor seemed slightly surprised. They didn’t really have the sort of friendship where they just genuinely asked if the other was okay all that often, even after shitty situations.

“I’m fine.” Victor grumbled. There was a long pause before he began speaking again. “... It just sucks. I-... I miss Amelia.” Victor's voice softened as he actually opened up for probably the first time with Lance.

“I know… I miss her too, and Asher-...” Lance whispered, and Victor tensed up.

"... Yeah." Victor's voice was tense again.

Victor didn't talk much about his life before meeting Daniel, but he had mentioned having a little brother. Maybe now wasn't the time, but Lance had realized there probably never would be the right time, so he decided to ask his questions now.

"... You have a brother, don't you? Do you ever think of reaching out to him..?" Lance asked softly.

"I *had* a brother." Victor replied stiffly.

"... Oh-... I'm- I'm sorry," Lance looked at the ground, guilt beginning to claw its way into his chest again.

"... it gets better, eventually." Victor whispered, looking at the ground as he set his plate to the side, the food having hardly even been picked over.

"Does it..?" Lance asked, watching his friend's expression closely, but he just looked so distant and reserved.

"I keep telling myself it does… You just- have to try not to think about it, you know?" Victor replied softly.

"I *can't* … its all I can fucking think about-" Lance responded, his voice sounding strained.

"It's probably gonna feel that way for a long fucking time, but it… it goes away- then you can ignore it, and move on." Victor's voice hardened, he almost sounded like he was still trying to convince himself. It sounded a little rehearsed too, like something he had been told and was now just passing along.

Lance just nodded a little, and stopped talking. There was nothing more for either of them to say.

Lance wished he knew what to fill those moments with though, because for such a long time he thought he had nothing more to say to Asher. If he had only known how things would end, he would have never stopped talking.

For the next few weeks following that, things gradually started to look up again.

Chardy had gotten a little more talkative, and he had started going to therapy. Lance still had his own regular therapist, but he increased how often his sessions were per Daniel's instruction.

It was still hard to talk about what happened, but he was gradually getting there.

Nights were still rough, though. He had started going into Asher's room each day, still desperately looking for *something* resembling his brother's presence to bring him some level of comfort. He would do his best not to move or touch anything, not wanting to disturb the alleged peace the room was supposed to bring.

He still never found the comfort he was looking for, Asher truly was gone from this place. Maybe it was never really his home to begin with, and maybe Lance just never noticed.

It was the night of Asher's birthday now, and today Lance had found himself hiding away alone in his room. Daniel and Chardy both tried to spend time with him, but he just wanted to be alone.

He kept thinking about all of the previous birthdays he had spent with Asher, and how for so many of them he wasn't even *there* .

Asher's parents had always made sure there was something overshadowing Asher's birthday, even having taken Lance in on that day. He didn't really understand it as a kid, because Asher still seemed so damn happy with his parents, or at least his mom. But now he understood, he was certain those people never really loved Asher.

At almost midnight, Lance couldn't fucking stand to be alone anymore, even if he deserved to be.

He made his way up to the roof, his wings glowing unusually bright from the overwhelming emotions coursing through him, numbing him to the rest of the world.

He had felt so much of nothing but misery for so long that even just the bit of happiness he'd occasionally get from a fond memory felt nearly suffocating, which didn't make any sense. He should be glad to feel things other than guilt or grief, but in the end it just made him feel so much *worse* when he couldn't find a reason to stay happy, and those horrible feelings came slinking back.

It was a windy, cold night as he walked over to the edge of the building. He wished he could see the stars better, but they were all

hidden by clouds or smog.

He looked down at the city, all those far away lights and what few cars or people were out right now. It all felt so distant, so far away and unreal.

There was just an inkling of a thought creeping into the back of his mind that maybe he should just fall.

Simply let himself drop right off the side of this building, the same way that Asher did. If he had no future or couldn't find reasons or ways to make himself happy, maybe he didn't deserve to be here at all.

But that was *crazy* , right?

Lance had never had thoughts like these before, but they felt like they were *crushing* him.

He lowered himself to the ground, sitting just on the edge as he let out a shaky breath.

It was then that he noticed for the first time in weeks, he didn't feel as alone anymore. Whipping his head around, he was half worried that someone might have come up here and seen him, but he didn't see anyone else. He was certain he was by himself, even with the dim lighting making it harder to see.

He just couldn't get over the feeling that *someone* was there. His chest tightened as he thought that maybe it was Asher, somehow reaching him from the other side.

He was delusional, surely, he just hadn't slept enough and was beginning to lose his mind, but now he was clinging to the idea that he was sensing Asher's very soul hovering around him.

"God damn, I'm losing it…" He whispered.

The wind brushed over his wings, feeling strangely like fingers running through his feathers for just a second.

"I'm so sorry, Asher…"

The wind began to die away, and with it went the feeling of someone's presence. Lance was alone again, left staring down at the ground so far below him, wondering if he really missed his friends and family

enough to die in an attempt to see them.

So there he sat in this limbo, some gray area between wanting to live and wanting to die. A line he had watched others walk before, but never felt the depth of until just then, debating his future.

But the wind felt so nice, like an odd blanket curling around him. He was sure at least someone here wouldn't *want* him to die, or maybe no one cared.

Maybe *he* didn't care what they thought, either. Maybe he was desperate enough for this depression to end that he was willing to try something insane like this.

Maybe, just maybe…

Chapter End Notes

> Do you guys think he jumped, or not?
> Thank you to anyone and everyone who has read this far, but now I SWEAR there will be no more updates to this. The closest we'll get is SOME DAY I might write a little spin-off series of some characters backstories, we'll see, but probably not since I'm moving on to my next big work which I'm trying to get published as a book

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!